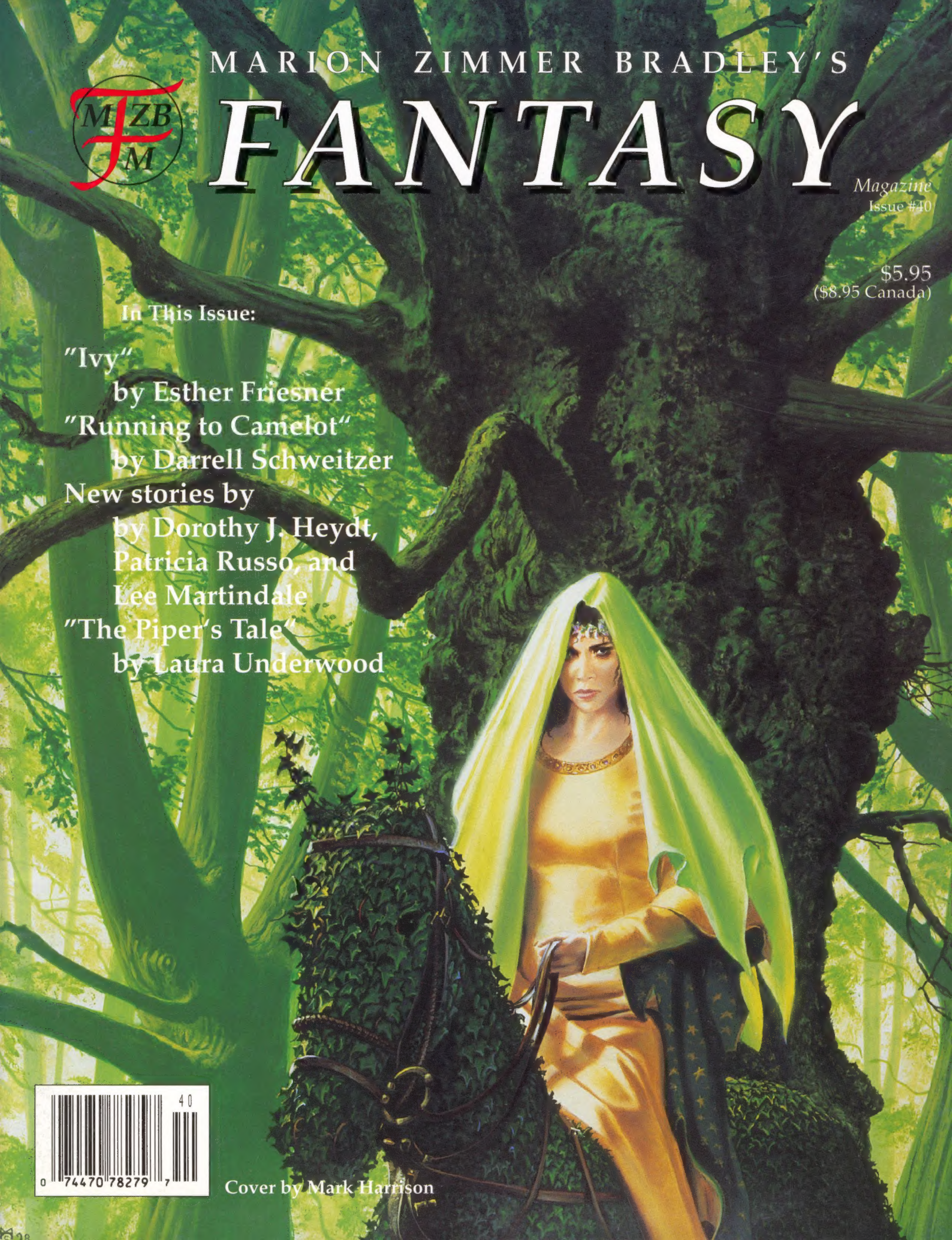
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Magazine
Issue #40
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In This Issue:
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"Running to Camelot"
by Darrell Schweitzer
New stories by
by Dorothy J. Heydt,
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Lee Martindale
"The Piper's Tale"
by Laura Underwood
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THE PAINTER KNIGHT
FIONA PATTON

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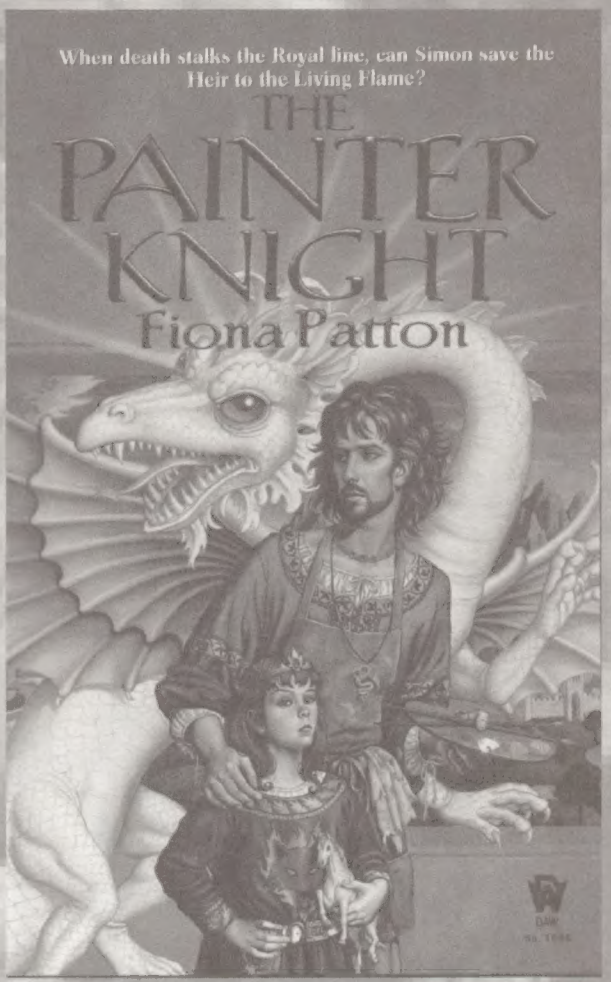

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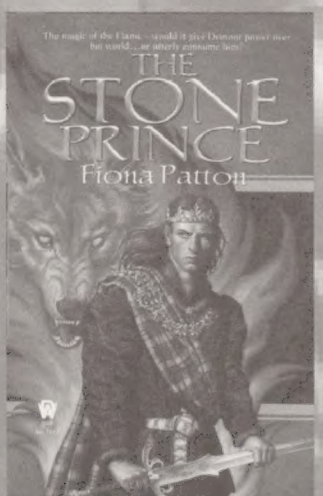

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EDITORIAL

I really didn't think, when I started this magazine, that it would last ten years; but this is issue forty, and even though I'm not very good at math, I can tell that adds up to ten years. When I started it I was not really certain of the direction that it would take. A few days ago I was reading a letter from an old editorial assistant, and he was at that time not sure whether it was aimed at readers or writers.

I remember thinking then — *Must the two be mutually exclusive?* I didn't then, and I don't now, think so. Some how or other the editing of this magazine has given me much more than I ever put into it; which has a sort of Biblical ring; That whatever you give comes back to you — heaped up, packed down and running over — for, as it says there, with whatsoever measure ye mete, so shall it be meted unto you.

It's for certain that I've learned more from "talking to writers" than I could have ever taught them. Which seems to have more of a moral to it than I ever thought there would be to learn. My first editor, who had many virtues — more, I am sure, than I ever gave her credit for — seemed never to get it through her head that this magazine was anything but therapy for my old age. Not long ago, when my accountant and I were going over the books, she asked me why I continued to edit it when it was not — to put it mildly — all that profitable. All I could think of to say to her was that in this climate I had no use for a mink coat, and I lose too many things to want jewels. And I can't drive more than one car at a time, or wear more than one dress, or even read more than one book at once. Editing is much more fun.

The secret of life isn't making lots of money. I know that's heresy in this country, but to me, the secret of life is finding some way to do the work you love, and getting somebody to pay you enough so you don't absolutely starve; because if I have learned one thing in a not-so-short life, it is that money never solved any problem *except* for those which are caused by the lack of money.

I grew up in such poverty that I envied the kids on welfare because at least they got enough to eat (my mother said we never missed a meal but that's not the way I remember it). Naturally, I thought that enough money would solve all my problems, But I found out the hard way that money doesn't solve your troubles — it just allow you to be unhappy in a little more comfort.

Of course, there was a time when I would have settled for that. Or at least, I thought I would.

Marion Zimmer Bradley

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BACK ISSUE DESCRIPTIONS

___#3 (Winter 1989) *The Adinkra Cloth* (a Nebula finalist!) - Mary C. Aldridge.
___#5 (Summer 1989) – "The Dragon Issue" *The Dragon, the Unicorn and the Teddy Bear* - Phyllis Ann Carr.Cover art by George Barr.
___#14 (Fall 1991) – *Black Ribbon* - Dawn Albright; cover by Gail Butler. *The Tengu's Scroll* - Dana Kramer-Rolls. *The Wuzzles* - M. Z. Bradley.
___#16 (Spring-Summer 1992) – *Never Look at a Gift Sword in the Horse's Mouth* - Jennifer Roberson; cover by Alan Gutierrez.
___#18 (Winter 1992) – *Arakney's Web* - Jo Clayton; cover by Nick Jainschigg. *The Black Tower* - Laura Underwood. *Queeneyes* - eluki bes shahar.
___#20 (Summer 1993) – *Cannibal Sorcerer* - Evangeline Walton & Bruce D. Arthurs. *Maiden, Are You Warm?* - Isabel Cole.
___#21 (Fall 1993) – *First Love, Last Love* - Tanya Huff. *Mages of Carthia* - Cynthia McQuillin. *Growing Season* - Dorothy J. Heydt.
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___#33 (Fall 1996) – *A Sphinx in the Mind* - Karen Anderson; cover by Margaret Organ-Kean. Interview with Esther Friesner.
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___#35 (Spring 1997) – *Maiden Phoenix* - India Edghill; cover Vincent Di Fate. Interview with Susan Shwartz.
___#36 (Summer 1997) – *The Knife that Makes Men* - Mary Aldridge; cover by Alicia Austin and George Barr. *A Certain Talent* - Dorothy J. Heydt. Interview with Vincent Di Fate.
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___#38 (Winter 1998) – *Bisclavret* - India Edghill; cover by Margaret Davis. Interview with Lawrence Watt-Evans.
___#39 (Spring 1998) – *Escape Artists* - Susan Shwartz; cover by David Cherry. Interview with Connie Willis.
___#40 (Summer 1998) – *Ivy* - Esther Friesner; cover by Mark Harrison

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FIONA PATTON

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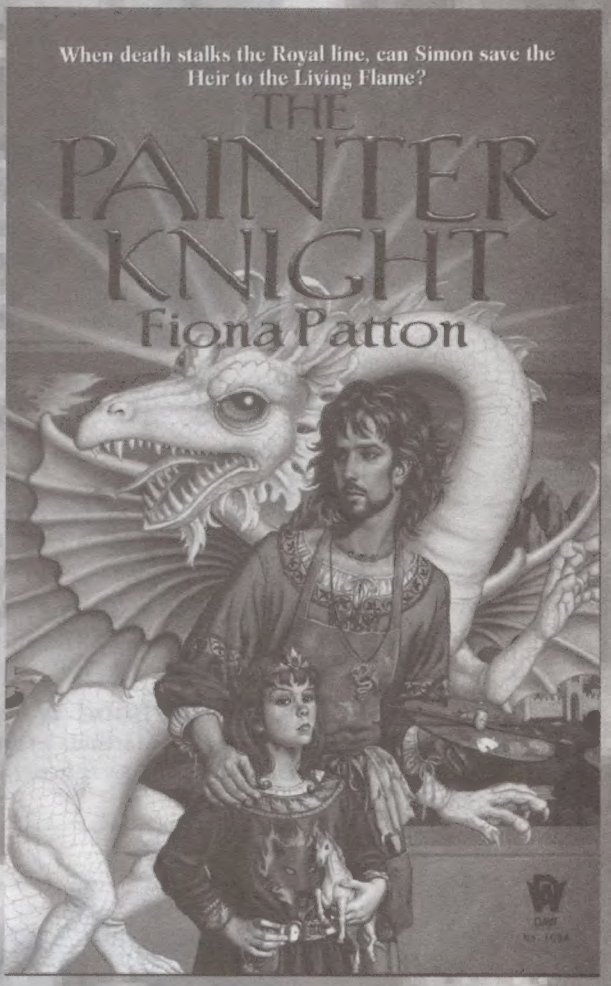

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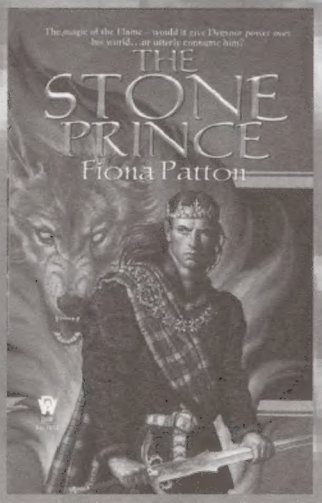

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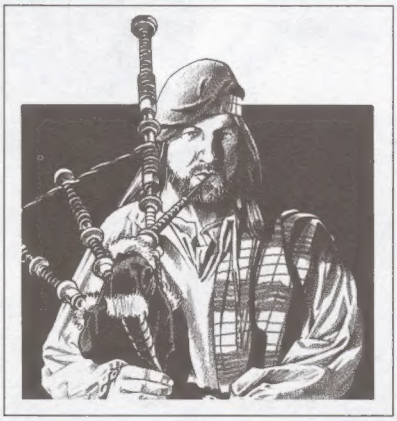

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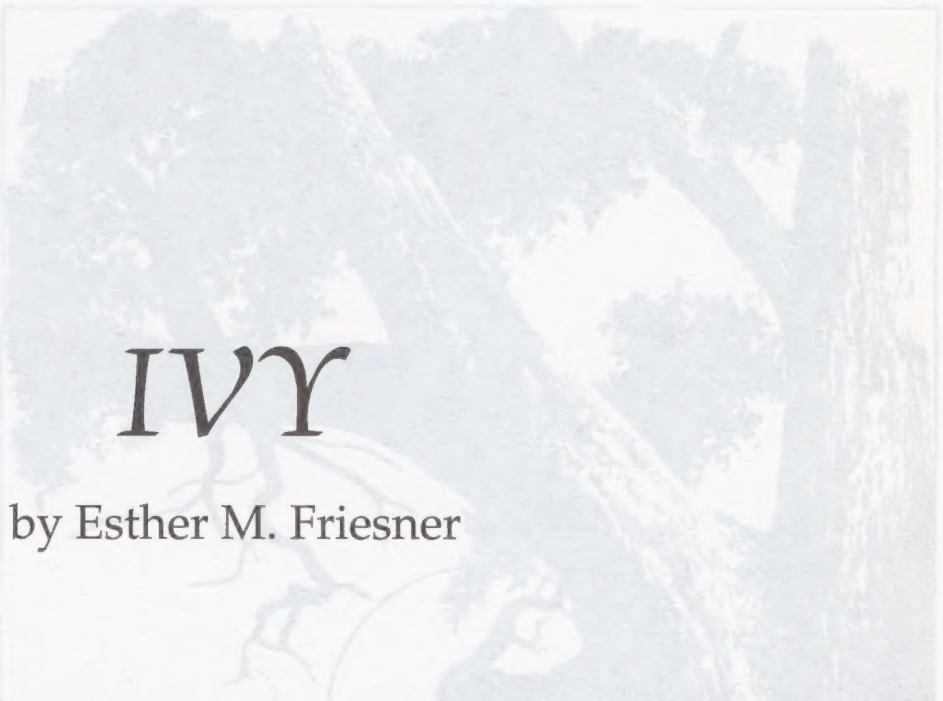


IVY

by Esther M. Friesner

Young Sir Tengri raised himself in the stirrups and gazed down upon the forested valley at his feet. The setting sun at his back cast a long shadow of man and mount over the fleecy green treetops. The last warm rays struck gold from the half-crumbled top of the lonely woodland tower.

"The Tower Perilous of the Forest Foredoomed," Sir Tengri said aloud, even though there was no one there to hear him. Talking to himself was a habit he'd picked up during his many solitary expeditions and adventures. He excused it by saying that all the heroes of whom the bards sang always spoke their noble thoughts aloud, but one small human corner of his heart knew that he really did it to keep his spirits up and to frighten off whatever might be lurking in the dark beyond the fire.

"Well, Pasamante, what do you think?" he asked his horse. "Shall we go on or shall we make camp here?" He gave the rapidly darkening prospect of tower and forest another long look. "Night's coming on, and we don't know what sort of strange creatures could be hiding in those trees. We should bed down now and set out at dawn."

"Coward," said the horse.

Sir Tengri almost fell over backwards with shock. Only years of training and good strong thighs kept him in the saddle.

"*What* did you say?" he demanded.

"Called you a coward," the horse replied, quite calm.

"And since when can you talk?"

"Since I'm not your horse, Pasamante, but the grand and masterful Wizard Deflibert of the Forest Foredoomed. Or did you think I was fool enough to trust you single-handed with this quest?"

The knight dismounted. He felt all quivery in the knees, but he managed to stand in front of Pasamante — or Wizard Deflibert — grasp the horse's bridle, stare it in the eye and say, "I am Sir Tengri, of whom the bards all sing. I have slain fifteen giants, liberated twenty-eight enchanted castles, defeated nine black knights, outwitted the riddles of eleven dwarves, two sphinxes, and a loathly hag, and you don't trust me with a simple *murder?*"

The possessed horse rolled its eyes. "Murder is such an ugly word."

"Well, murder is such an ugly deed," the knight countered. "But it's still a murder you want done, so don't go prettifying it with the name of *quest*. Murder it is and murder you want; and the murder of a helpless maiden at that!"

The horse's huge teeth ground together. "There is nothing helpless about this maiden," it rasped.

"Don't be silly." Sir Tengri absentmindedly stroked the horse's muzzle. "All maidens are helpless."

The beast tossed its head. "Shows what you know."

"I know enough to tell the truth as it stands. You came to my castle half crazy with fear, hunger, and exposure, you craved aid in restoring you to your rightful residence in the Tower Perilous whence you had been cruelly thrust — your own words, remember! — by a wicked, calculating young maiden who was mistress of sundry sovereign spells and subtle sorceries —"

"Would you mind facing the other way if you're going to say any more words beginning with 's'?" the horse requested. "That little gap between your front teeth isn't doing either of us any favors."

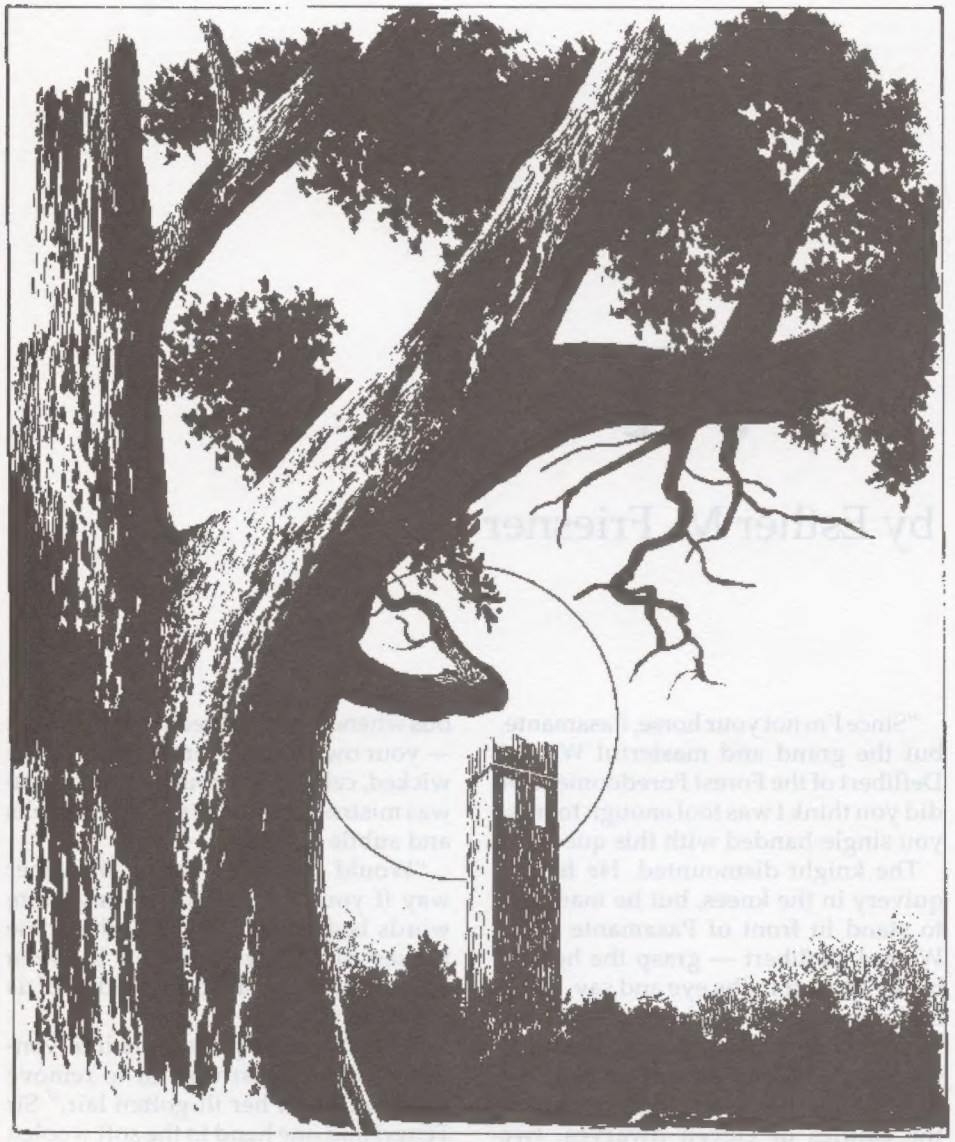
"— and you implored the intervention of my bravest warrior to remove the vixen from her ill-gotten lair." Sir Tengri laid one hand to the soft woolen surcoat covering his chain-mailed bosom. "Naturally you meant me and naturally I accepted, leaving the castle in my brother Usric's loving trust and care."

"Naturally. Haw!" The transmuted wizard enjoyed a nasty horse-laugh. "When we do reach my old place, there's a certain magic mirror I'd like you to take a peek into. It shows you the truth of things barefaced and baldheaded."

Sir Tengri looked hurt. "I *am* speaking the truth of things. It all happened just as I said."

"How things *happen* and how they *are* can often be as different as peapod from peacock," the mage-mount opined. "Well, believe what you like, so long as you do the job for me."

"A job you don't seem to think I can do without you along to mind my cradle," Sir Tengri spat. "If you've so little trust in my abilities, you should've



Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

taken your business elsewhere."

"It's not your abilities as a fighter I mistrust," the wizard said. "The bards are not the most reliable sources of information, but when every one of them agrees that Sir Tengri is this land's paramount swordsman, there must be something to it. You couldn't possibly have enough money to bribe them all."

"Your confidence in me is overwhelming." The young knight's cold demeanor meant little or nothing to his companion.

"My faith in your sword is absolute. It's your skills at judging human nature that I think I'd best oversee. Come on, mount up. We've a ways to go before we reach the Tower Perilous."

Still dubious, Sir Tengri swung himself into the saddle. "Are you sure about this?" he asked. By this time, dusk was staining the sky a deep indigo and the path downslope into the trees was no more than a ghost's smoky whisper. "I don't think it's very wise to go blundering through someplace called the Forest Foredoomed at night. Who knows what hideous monsters we'll find?"

"First they were just strange creatures, now you've promoted them to hideous monsters," the horse said as it picked its way along the path. "Who are you trying to scare, you or me? Look, I *know* what we'll find in those woods: I lived there for forty-odd years and never saw anything more hideous than a wet squirrel."

"Then why is it called the Tower Perilous of the Forest Foredoomed?" Sir Tengri asked.

"Because I'm a wizard and wizards don't like company, as a rule. People distract us from our studies, always picking up the cauldron lid and poking their noses into phials and philters that don't concern them and hanging over your shoulder while you're trying to unravel some ancient thread of grammarye and shouting in your ear, 'Oooooohhh, what's *that* word mean?' or 'Is that a *real* spell?' or 'Anything in there that'll cure my lumbago?'" He snorted loudly. "Living in the Tower Perilous of the Forest Foredoomed is ever so much better for keeping off the riffraff than living in the Tower Bide-a-Wee of the Forest Welcome. Until that poxy maiden showed up on my doorsill it worked perfectly for me."

The moon had risen well above the encircling mountains by the time knight and steed entered the forest proper. The dappled silver light shining through the leaves cast a net of silence over all living things.

It was only much later that Sir Tengri dared to whisper, "This maiden you want murdered ... shouldn't you tell me a little more about her?"

"Why?" the wizard asked. "You didn't wait to hear any details when we first met. No, not you. All you wanted to hear was *adventure, ho!* and off you dashed, throwing on your armor, grabbing any old sword that came to hand, tossing your castle into your brother Usric's loving trust and care — *again,* from what I heard among the servants — and giving the cooks scarcely time to pack you a decent lunch."

"Yes, well —" The young knight sounded ill at ease. "Well ... I've been thinking."

"Bravo."

"I mean, here you are, a mighty wizard with forty-odd years' experience under your belt, and yet one fine morning along comes this mere slip of a girl and before you know it, snip-snap, you're out on your ear!"

"It wasn't my ear," the wizard growled.

"I just wondered what sort of enchantments she used on you, that's all. In case I've brought the wrong sword. I've got a whole slew of them at home, some very nicely individually bespelled against fire, dragons, eternal sleep, ogres, fairies, witches, trolls —"

"Glad I came along after all, aren't you?" The possessed horse stopped in its tracks and turned its head to grin at the knight on its back.

Sir Tengri ignored the barb. "Do I need a different sword?"

"Can the one you've got cut wood?" the horse asked.

"Yes."

"We're all right then."

They passed the rest of their journey in prudent silence, although the knight's sullen expression seemed to say that his own muteness was more a product of sulks than strategy. The trees of the Forest Foredoomed were mostly oak and beech, old and well-established. No blue-green blush of pine or fir disturbed their dominion, and the bracken clustered around their gnarled roots appeared to live there on sufferance. Here and there a fairy-ring of fungi glowed with its own pale radiance, but the integrity of the charmed circle was frequently violated by an upstart sapling sprouting in its very midst.

At last there came a shining through the trees that was brighter and more intense than any timorous fay-light. Sir Tengri shifted in the saddle and shaded his eyes, despite the lingering shadows of night, the better to see its source.

"Sit still." The wizard's voice came harsh and short. "It's just the Tower Perilous. As if you didn't know. We're almost home."

Then, to Sir Tengri's surprise, his steed turned aside from the beckoning gleam and trotted off down a branchlet of the main path. No amount of pulling at the reins would stop or turn the animal until it had gone down a sudden, steep declivity that took them both into a sheltered dell within the woods. Here stood a modest cottage, cleanly thatched despite the fact that there was no natural source of straw available for miles about. Here too a pool of sweet waters bubbled out of the earth, a rippling blue gem set in the midst of a flowery velvet greensward with never the hint that ancient trees ever had dared set root anywhere nearby. Of stumps there were none, not even the shadows.

"Get off," said the horse. "Go inside. There ought to be something in the pantry, if you're hungry. You can eat with confidence — there's a preservation spell on the crocks and kegs — and the spring water's the best. Far better than that mucky little stream by the Tower Perilous, anyhow."

Sir Tengri slid from the saddle, much troubled in voice and manner. "Why are we here? You were in such haste to bring me into the forest, yet now you keep me from the Tower Perilous and the maiden who took it from you." His hand closed around the hilt of his sword. "If this is some plot against me —"

"You wouldn't know a plot against you if it took care of your castle every time you went haring off on another of your silly adventures," the wizard remarked. "And I'll wager that if twenty of the farmers who till your lands were to come before you with all the grievances they've got against your brother, you wouldn't be able to recognize one face among them."

"Grievances?" The word was scarcely out of Sir Tengri's mouth before a verdant shimmering wrapped itself around his steed, a sparkling green magic that melted away the noble horse and left a small, slender woman standing in its place. She was veiled head to toe in gossamers the color of the first springtime shoots, her waist clasped with a belt of golden grapevines, a circlet of white fawnbells on her head. A sweetly curling tendril of blue-black hair escaped her veil to caress one rosy cheek and her dark eyes were alight with laughter.

"How do you do?" she said by way of greeting.

"*Who* do I have to do with?" Sir Tengri replied, agape. "*That's* the question! What have you done with my horse? I mean the wizard? I mean —"

"Oh, in both cases you mean me," the maiden replied.

"So you're the evil one who usurped the Tower Perilous from its proper owner!" the knight exclaimed.

"Nonsense," she said evenly. "No one owns the Tower Perilous; no one has for centuries. Who'd want it? It's all run down, gone to ruin. Those who've heard tell of the place leave it to the owls and welcome. I find this cottage to be much cozier, especially when it rains."

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

"But — but what of the wizard?" Sir Tengri protested. "The wizard of the Tower Perilous, the one who came seeking my aid?"

The maiden tilted her head to one side and her face grew thin and pale, weighted down with a spidery weight of frosty beard. "Does that answer your question?" she said, straightening her neck and reverting to her true seeming once more. "Now sit down." She gestured at the knight with the wand of peeled and gilded pussy willow in her left hand, the catkins glimmering silver. "I think you'll find the split-log bench beside the cottage door most comfortable."

Sir Tengri growled a curse and reached for his sword. The lady laughed loud and made a coaxing gesture with her wand. The soil at Sir Tengri's feet shivered and split, torn apart by the upward thrust of squirming creepers. Leafy twirls of ivy lashed themselves around his ankles in short order. He slashed at them with his sword, but only succeeded in delaying the inevitable. (The blade could indeed cut wood and all manner of miscellaneous green stuff besides, but this was *determined* flora.) More vines sprang from the soil behind him, shooting straight up his back before whipping themselves around shoulders and upper arms until he stood firmly trussed, helpless and miserable, a captive of the green.

"All right," said the lady, considering her handiwork. "So you'd rather chat while standing. Some people prefer it that way. I hope you won't mind if I choose to sit down. I'm very tired. I've been on my feet for ages, and an armored knight's not the easiest thing in the world to carry on your back." She ambled past him to the cottage bench as if there was nothing at all unusual about Sir Tengri's situation. The ivy binding the young knight most obligingly turned him around so that he was still facing her.

"Vile sorceress, base deceiver, whatever your black name, I vow that you shall get no good of my death!" Sir Tengri declaimed.

"I doubt you will, either," the lady replied. "Death has so little to recommend it, I wonder why people bother with it at all." Her wand stirred the air and fresh grapevines snaked out of the ground, weaving themselves into a perfect basket at her feet. A few sharp taps with the wand's tip and the basket filled — pop! pop! pop! — with oranges. She tore the peel from one with her teeth, skinned it, sectioned it, and devoured the morsels while she spoke.

"I'll get to the point, Sir Tengri," she said. "You own the biggest slab of land for leagues around — if you think you can really *own* land."

The knight tensed in his bonds. "I am my father's legal heir, and as such master of all his domains, which he had from his father, and he from his father before him, and he —"

"All those bloodlines," the lady mused. "All those sword-toughened hands going back into the lost ages. How far back do they have to go before we find a single hand that earned its calluses at the plow, hm? Working the land. *Nursing* the land. *Caring* for the land even when the land itself doesn't seem to care whether it lives or dies. *Loving* the land." She ate another section of orange and spat the pips into her palm. "I know lords whose boar hounds have longer bloodlines than you. The boar's got none, but when they corner him he still manages to rip them open like flour sacks."

Sir Tengri's face paled a little under its layer of battlefield tan, but his stern expression flickered out of control only a little before he said, "If you mean to serve me in the same manner, magician, I will teach you the difference between a dog's death and a man's."

The lady raised one delicately arched eyebrow. "Again you return to death? Is that why you've wasted your life so shamelessly, seeking all sorts of foolish ways to tempt the shade? 'Oh, take notice of me, good Death!' you seem to shout every time you mount your horse and gallop off after some poor innocent ogre's head. And what do you do with the heads after you take 'em? They're hard to stuff and impossible to pickle and they stink long before you get them back to the castle anyway."

"I am not in this for the trophies," Sir Tengri spat. "I do it for my honor as a knight."

"Oh, huzzah," said the lady without enthusiasm, tracing figures-of-eight with her pussy willow wand. She struck the ground with the wand's tip and four new ivy vines broke the clods apart. These climbed the air, knotting themselves into four stout legs, uniting into a barrel-shaped body, and at last curving themselves fore and aft into the leafy head and tail of a horse.

The ivy binding Sir Tengri gave him a leg up into the saddle of the green

steed, stems snapping themselves free of the ground. Even without roots, the ivy twisted with life. As he sat with nothing but leaf and vine between his legs, the knight saw the little sorceress conjure up a second steed for her own use, as pretty a palfrey as ever stepped from the stables of his castle, for all that it was grown of greenery, not bred of horseflesh. Both mounts tore their feet loose from the soil and moved forward with a gentle gait that set the wind rustling through their leaves.

"By rights we should both be getting some sleep," the lady remarked as their weird steeds bore them onward.

"I need little sleep," Sir Tengri answered proudly.

"I don't wonder. All those dangerous adventures, when a goodly knight doesn't dare close an eye —"

"Exact —"

"— for fear of missing something new to kill."

"— ly." Sir Tengri scowled. The lady only smiled. "If I have ever earned any merit as a knight, I vow on my sword that I shall learn your true name, evil one — for the name of a magician is always her undoing — and I shall use it!"

"Good," the lady replied. "It's nice to know you're willing to learn *something*."

With her wand, she described a huge arc from left to right before them. The prospect of dark forest trees fell away as a light-filled portal opened. The ivy steeds stepped through, trading a footway of dead leaves for one of beaten earth.

Sir Tengri glanced all around him, astonished. The Forest Foredoomed was gone; they rode through the center of a peasant village. Dirty smoke smutched the sky. Pigs ran freely in the narrow ways between the wood-and-daub houses. The tilled fields rayed out from the center of the village, fair green spokes from a hub of filth and stench and mire.

"They keep the fields better than they keep their own homes." The lady stated the obvious. "What's rooted out there can't be taken from them."

They passed like green ghosts through the village, pausing here and there so that Sir Tengri might peer through a door ajar or an unglazed window. There was a small open space in the center of the huddle of huts, and there stood five armed men, their white woolen surcoats so clean against the backdrop of muck and weariness that it hurt the eye to see them. A gathering of farmer folk waited on their words, the men bent almost double with the weight of toil and hopelessness, the women beaten down, yet their eyes somehow still holding onto one last spark of defiance.

The sorceress called her steeds to a halt. Sir Tengri in his bonds leaned forward, perplexed by many things. "Those are my men," he said. "What are they doing here?"

"That will become obvious."

"But why don't they come to my aid? I am their lord! Don't they see I'm a wrongful prisoner? Ho! Sir Hylas! Sir Orphit! Hallooo, Sir Gengras! Aid, aid!" he cried to men-at-arms and peasantry alike. It was as if his words were never spoken. Sinking back onto the ivy horse's barrel he asked, "A glamour? We are invisible to them, true?"

The lady's smile held its share of pity. "Let's just say that since you never saw your tenants, why should they see you? And as for those brave fighting men —" the curl of her lip was sour with irony "— they've set their sights on a lord more to their liking."

She did not give Sir Tengri time to ask a single question. A brisk word spoken in the fringey ear of her mount turned the ivy horses back into the tangle of village streets. As he rode away helpless behind her, Sir Tengri heard the knights announce new taxes to be paid at the castle gates, new penalties if the taxes did not arrive.

"I never ordered any new taxes," he murmured.

"You never ordered anything except new armor." The lady tossed the words back over one shoulder. She halted the horses before a hut. There were no windows in its clay walls, no door to hang either open or closed. A skinny yellow dog sprawled near the open portal, nursing a litter of four squirming puppies.

Sir Tengri felt the vines binding his arms loosen. He gave the lady an inquiring look. She simply nodded towards the gaping doorway. He rubbed feeling back into his arms — feeling all the more desperately needed since her magic had bound him up sword in hand. His wrist felt like jelly, his hand ready to drop off. The blade with its richly jeweled hilt fell into the mud unheeded as he flexed his fingers tenderly.

Then he heard the sobbing from in-

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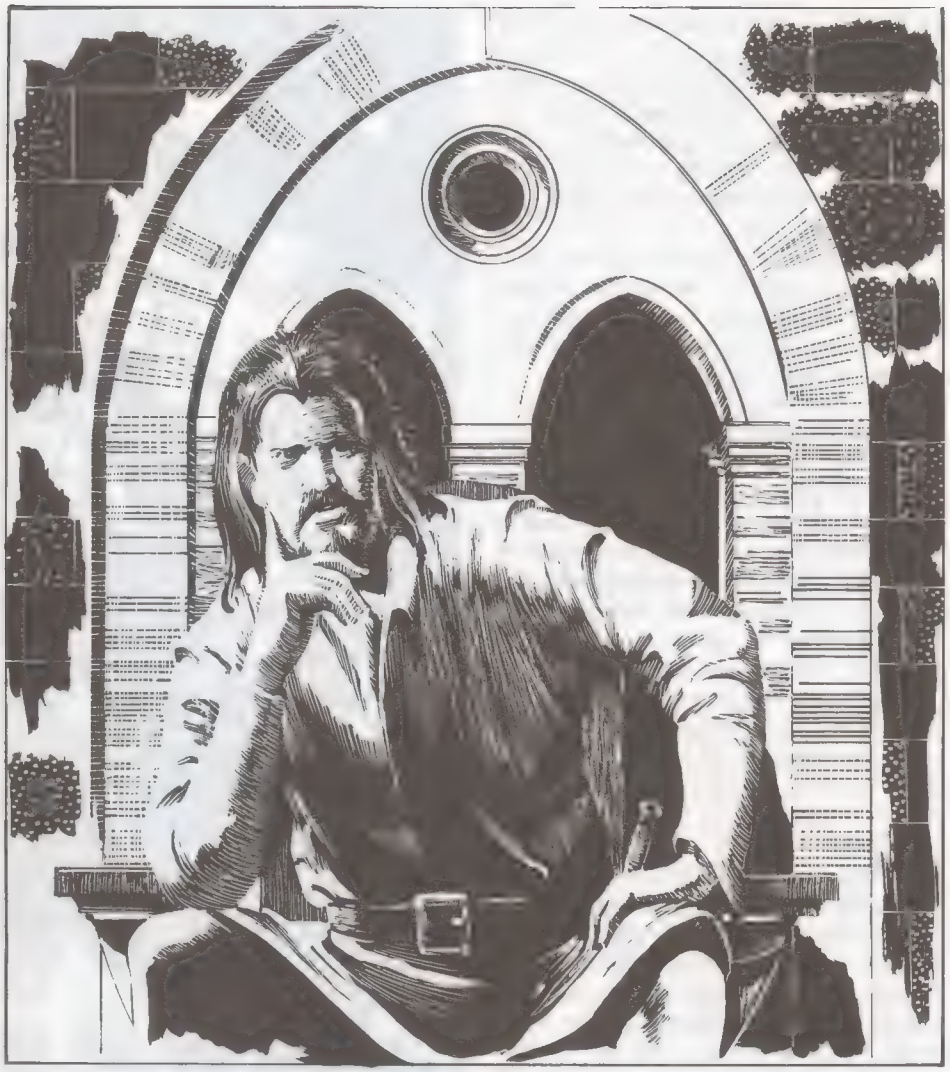


Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

side.

The lady did not need to tell him to seek its source. He could not have a heart and ignore such piteous sounds. It was dark inside the hut, the shadows made heavier by a thick reek of greasy smoke and human misery. There was no chimney, only a ragged hole torn through the roof. The circle of stones marking off the fireplace was filled with icy ashes. A stray sunbeam falling through the smokehole caught dancing dust motes in its light, the only things inside the hut that were at all bright or lively or free.

The heap of straw in the darkest corner might have once had a toss of cloth over it for ticking. There was a dirty rag left, and that was all. Curled up like an infant rat in its nest, a child of three or four clutched the rag and wept. It was half-naked, its tunic too small, even for so wasted a little body. A swollen belly strained against the meager cloth. The color of its hair and skin were both made unreadable by dirt. Its sex too was a riddle. *Will I live to be a man? Will I live to be a woman?* What did these questions matter when no one could answer the simpler plea, *Will I live?*

Sir Tengri fell to his knees before the weeping child. He stretched out his hand to stroke the matted hair. The heart that always been his steadfast source of courage in battle was choking him. Eyes that had beheld a dazzlement of wonder — monsters, splendors, treasures, grandest sorcery — now blurred and left him blind.

He never knew how long he knelt there, but when at last he rose to his feet once more, his gaze was as fixed and purposeful as any time he'd set out to slay a dragon. He snapped the purse of coins from his belt — he never set out on his adventures without providing for the necessities of the road — and let it fall beside the pallet, then strode out of the hovel. The lady watched him pick up his sword and remount his green steed in silence, and in silence they rode back to the castle that was his home.

There was that about Sir Tengri's expression that stopped the mouths of his guardsmen when they saw him ride into his stronghold on such an outlandish mount, in such strange company. Not one of them fought free of their bedazzlement in time to announce his coming as he marched through the passageways and into the great hall where his brother Usric sat comfortably ensconced in Sir Tengri's favorite chair.

Usric did not notice his brother's return immediately, for steeds made of ivy lack hooves to clip-clop over flagstone floors. He was attended by a host of the same bards who so often had immortalized Sir Tengri's exploits in song. One of their number was presently singing about how bold Sir Tengri had gone off to slay the dire Wyrm of Woadwick — a ballad so familiar to the young knight's court that it had become a staple, a classic, almost a cliché — only this time the words were not the ones Sir Tengri knew. They had been changed a bit, given a certain cutting edge, and rather than lauding his prowess in battle against the monster they mocked him for being fool enough to fight a dragon of that size all by himself.

The bard was winding up his song with a tip of his hat to Dame Fortune, whose capricious taste for rescuing fools was well known, when a slim vine sprouted from the very belly of his lute and wrapped itself thrice around the instrument's neck, abruptly silencing the strings. Everyone stared, first at the lute, then at the figure in the doorway.

"Why, brother, ba— back so soon?" Usric looked up sharply from the bags of coin and rolls of parchment strewing the table before him. "Wh— what a happy surprise."

Sir Tengri crossed the great hall and snatched one of the scrolls, reading there in ink still damp a roll of new mandates Usric issued in his name. Not one of these failed to enrich his brother at the expense of his people. He looked up and met Usric's eyes.

"Happy for some," said Sir Tengri, fingering the hilt of his sword.

For several hours thereafter, the only sounds to be heard in the great hall was the impatient drumming of Sir Tengri's fingers on the tabletop, the rapid scritch-scritch of plume over parchment

as a sweating Usric reworded document after document — to his disadvantage and the people's benefit — and the scuttle of fleeing bards, hightailing it to the patronage of some other lordling. (Preferably one without an angry, well-armed older brother whose valiant deeds they'd so lately mocked in song.)

Exhausted, Usric was just sprinkling sand over the last of his signatures when Sir Tengri felt a small, strong hand on his arm. "I think I'll be going now," said the lady.

"Going?" Sir Tengri echoed. "But you can't! That is, there's so much else left to do here, for the sake of my vassals, for the sake of my realm, for my —!"

The lady smiled and shook her head. "What there's yet left to do must be your doing, not mine." She whistled once, and the two ivy horses twined their component vines into the body of a single steed. When she went to mount up, a branch lowered itself to give her a lift into the flowering saddle. Taking up the reins, she turned the leafy beast's head for the doorway.

"Wait!" Sir Tengri flung himself forward, seizing the bridle. "On my honor as knight, I can not in good conscience allow you to leave like this. O fair enchantress, in the depths of your dark tower — I mean, the parlor of your cottage — you heard my people's plight and of your own kind heart were moved to show me the error of my wastefully heroic ways. You emerged from beneath the twofold disguise of the graybeard wizard of the Tower Perilous in turn masquerading as my noble horse, Pasamante, all for the sake of my long-suffering vassals. Your magical arts have shown me that majestic as the oak may seem, often it is the humble sprig of ivy clinging to its trunk that is the true support and mainstay of the mighty tree. You are as wise in your craft as you are kind, as kind as you are beautiful. That said, even though I am still ignorant of your true name, there is one thing I *must* now ask of you or call myself a proper knight nevermore!"

"Oh dear." The lady sighed and rolled her eyes. "I was afraid this would happen. It always does." She reached down to pat his hand gently. "Sir Tengri, you're a very nice young man and I think the world of you, but I also think it would be better for both of us if we could just be —"

"Can I have my horse back?"

❄

Esther M. Friesner supposedly lives in Connecticut with her husband, two teenaged children, two mad cats, and a fluctuating population of hamsters. However, she may currently be found floating a bit above the earth's surface since having won the Nebula Award for Best Short Story for 1995 and 1996. Best known for her funny fantasies, she is having a very good time messing with people's expectations by writing books like **THE SHERWOOD GAME** (which is sf), **CHILD OF THE EAGLE** (alternate history), **TO STORM HEAVEN** (a *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novel) and **THE PSALMS OF HEROD** (best read with the lights *on*). She is yet another unfortunate who can't imagine *not* writing. On the other hand, what's so bad about that?

Mark Harrison is the cover artist for a number of the books in the Trillium series, inluding **GOLDEN TRILLIUM** (Andre Norton), **SKY TRILLIUM**, (Julian May), and **BLACK TRILLIUM** (Marion Zimmer Bradley, Julian May, and Andre Norton). His clients have included Del Rey, Penguin, Doubleday, Bantam Books, Grafton, Orbit, Legend, Corgi, Black Swan, and *Asimov's Science Fiction*. He lives in the U.K.

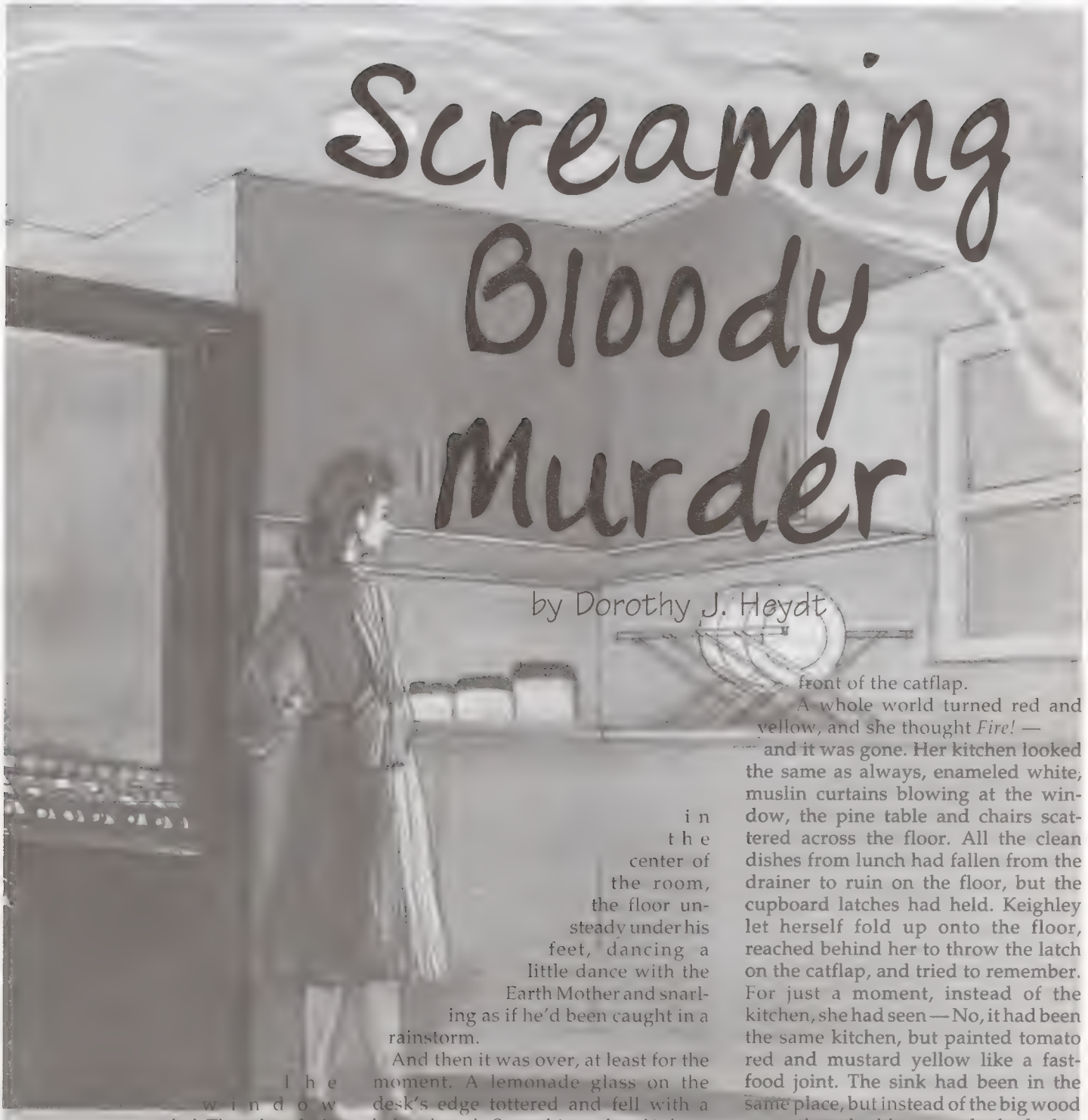
Vincent Di Fate lives in New York State. He worked in animated films before turning to freelance artwork. He received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards. He is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes, including astronomical and aerospace themes for the National Geographic Society, CBS television, and NASA.

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

Artwork by Gail Butler

Screaming Bloody Murder

by Dorothy J. Heydt



The window rattled. Then the whole house rattled, and Keighley came back from distant lands to feel the chair shaking under her. She wrote and quit her file and logged out, slid under the desk and grabbed the CPU like a life raft or a straying toddler. One hand crept up to the power switch. The disk drive chattered and fell silent and she threw the switch, while the rattling and rumbling swelled to fortissimo and far down the hillside somebody screamed. The cat Rhadamanthos stood in the center of the room, the floor unsteady under his feet, dancing a little dance with the Earth Mother and snarling as if he'd been caught in a rainstorm.

And then it was over, at least for the moment. A lemonade glass on the desk's edge tottered and fell with a belated crash. Something echoed it from the kitchen. *Ye gods, the cleaning up I'm going to have —*

Rhadamanthos got his feet under him and ran for the kitchen where the cat door was, Keighley in hot pursuit. "No, no, cat, you don't want out just now. Well, maybe you do, but you're not going." She'd have to put him in the carrier till he calmed down, or things did. She put a hand to the swinging door and took the long step inward that planted her right foot squarely in front of the catflap.

A whole world turned red and yellow, and she thought *Fire!* — and it was gone. Her kitchen looked the same as always, enameled white, muslin curtains blowing at the window, the pine table and chairs scattered across the floor. All the clean dishes from lunch had fallen from the drainer to ruin on the floor, but the cupboard latches had held. Keighley let herself fold up onto the floor, reached behind her to throw the latch on the catflap, and tried to remember. For just a moment, instead of the kitchen, she had seen — No, it had been the same kitchen, but painted tomato red and mustard yellow like a fast-food joint. The sink had been in the same place, but instead of the big wood stove there had been — she looked at the image again, a single frame in the mind's archive — well, a console of some kind with a huge TV screen in it and God knew what else. And the pine table gone, and somebody standing at the other end of the room.

Rhadamanthos climbed into her lap, claws pricking through the tough denim of her jeans, every hair standing on end. Keighley stroked him. "Like quills upon the fretful porpentine," she murmured. "It's all right, cat. It's only

Artwork by Gail Butler

an earthquake." But what that other thing had been, she couldn't imagine.

After a while, she got up and began cleaning and repairing. So did everybody else. The papers were full of the stories for weeks. The top deck of the Bay Bridge had fallen, and the Santa Cruz Boardwalk was in ruins. Keighley fared better than most, with ample supplies on hand and a woodstove that turned the stuff in the freezer into a huge stockpot. She even had good store of bottled water, since her well had gone nearly dry in the long years of the drought; she still had two quarts left when the Alhambra delivery truck was next able to make its way up her mountain road. She patched her windows with oiled paper till she could get glass, and wrote in longhand till the power came back on. Eventually things went back to normal.

Then the rains came back.

The clouds floated in like big rolags of grey wool, filling the sky from horizon to horizon, and the drops began to fall. First they soaked in; then they ran off in little trickles toward the dry creekbeds. Rhadamanthos vaulted into the living room through an open window as Keighley ran to shut it. The air smelled like heaven, like wet earth, and the drops rattled against the roof. "No more sponge baths," Keighley sang. "No more saving the grey water for the plants. No more tribute paid to Alhambra. C'mon, cat, want a ginger ale?" She pushed open the kitchen door.

Red and yellow, and a huge face on the huge screen saying, "— poration declared second —" and a woman standing with her back to the door, hands clenched at her sides. And then it was gone, and Keighley brushed aside the wet curtains and closed the kitchen windows. She split the ginger ale with the cat and thought of adding something stronger to her portion, but *No, I better not mess with my head till I figure out what's wrong with it.* She ran over the clip in her mind, a whole second's worth this time, with sound. The newscaster's fragment was no problem: "XYZ Corporation declared second-quarter earnings of N dollars" was as stock a phrase as "The organization known as XYZ claimed responsibility for the bombing."

That had been a heck of a TV screen, though, three by four feet or thereabouts, brighter and crisper than any projection system she'd seen. Most of the other bells and whistles on the console, she couldn't even guess what they were for; and the whole thing — she took a good look at the perspectives in the memory clip — the whole thing stood only eight or ten inches out from the wall. They weren't making stuff like that anywhere, not even Japan.

So did I see a vision of the future?

Either that or a vision of the past. That woman had been dressed for the early 1940s — a belted shirtwaist dress with a tight skirt, elbow sleeves with silly little cuffs, made of green-and-white-striped seersucker, for heaven's sake. Her mother had dressed like that.

But no one had TVs of that kind, or any other kind, in Keighley's youth, so it must be the future she was seeing — if she was seeing anything and not merely raving. A time when Forties fashions had come back — a mistake, if you asked *her* — and huge flat entertainment centers were common enough that you'd put one in the kitchen. A time beyond her own lifespan, probably — well, darn it, of *course* she would be dead and gone by the time that woman stood in green seersucker listening to the second-quarter financial news. While she lived, she'd never see this kitchen redone in tomato red and mustard yellow.

Keighley felt no pang at this reminder of her own mortality; she'd come to terms with that long since. She only wished her successor could've had a little better taste.

She put the whole thing on the back burner, she wouldn't let it bother her — but the next time she went into the kitchen she pushed the door in cautiously, breath held, in anticipation of what she'd see, and saw nothing.

Two weeks went by, and three more soaking rainstorms, and Keighley's well filled up again. She dug up a few square feet of her neglected garden and planted lettuce and broccoli, cool-weather plants that would grow happily through what the Bay Area inaccurately called winter. Rhadamanthos learned again to make the reluctant choice between going outside in the rain and using the cat box.

It was on the day after Thanksgiving that Keighley stepped into the kitchen, to check on the turkey carcass in the soup pot, and saw the colors again. "... and warmer, with highs reaching into the thirties," said the newscaster. (She hadn't noticed before: he was wearing a turtleneck, not a tie — and the Centigrade scale had finally invaded the United States.) Two people stood in the kitchen. The woman dressed for the Forties wore blue chambray today, and a hairstyle of the same vintage: all the hair had been curled back around the face into a coronet look that had also been trendy in Imperial Rome. It was all coming down now, because the man was slamming her head against the wall; and his hands were around her throat.

And it was gone, and there was nothing in the kitchen but the smell of turkey and the sound of rain. Keighley made her way to the nearest chair and sat in it.

It was a cliché. *You witness a murder that won't be committed for another 30 years.* How many B movies had she seen, to say nothing of spoof articles on how to make the grade as a B-movie heroine. *The house changes size in the night, strange voices speak from inside the TV set, and you haven't seen the cat in days.* — "Rhadamanthos! Kit-kit-kit-kit!"

The door swung once, twice, and on the third swing Rhadamanthos shouldered his way through. He stopped and bristled and spat, glaring at the place where the woman had stood, or was going to stand.

Faced with all this, you (a) Get out. (b) Call in a platoon of priests with a tankful of holy water. (c) Wring your hands and say "Oh dear." (c) being the right answer, of course, if you wanted to achieve transitory fame and meagre fortune in the movies marked B.

"Maybe I'm dumber than I thought," she said aloud, and the cat looked at her suspiciously and sat down to wash. "'Cause I'm not getting out; this is my house."

Remembering what she had come in there for, she checked the turkey, gently simmering its way off the bone. Another couple of hours and it'd be ready to strip. She checked Rhadamanthos's food and water dishes, grabbed hat and jacket and went for a walk in the rain.

She came back with two plot ideas and something like a chip on her shoulder. How dare that creep do murder in her kitchen? She scraped mud from her shoes on the back doorstep, hung her hat and jacket in the porch to dry. By Od's bodkins, she'd *get* a priest if need be, bell, book and candle and a buffalo of holy water — and laughed in spite of her foul mood. The nearest priest was Father Carey at Holy Cross, an ex-Ma-

rine; she pitied any haunt he chose to tackle. She pushed the door open and took a breath.

From the back door she got a different view of the tomato-colored kitchen. The shelves against the far wall had been replaced by rows of built-in cabinets (Keighley had been thinking of having that done; maybe she was going to do it). The newscaster said, "... met with the King of Bosnia-Herzegovina ...." The man and woman were still there, but the steps had changed. His hands were reaching for her throat, but weren't going to reach it, because she had raised a big kitchen knife and plunged it into his gut. A smooth upward motion, it would be a miracle if it didn't reach his heart.

Keighley must have come into the place beyond shock. She said "Hmmm," and took a glass from the drainer, filled it at the sink, drank it down. So what did this mean? Was the future still fluid, not fixed, and what she'd seen was just another of several possibilities? Or had it been a clip from slightly later in the sequence — he bangs her head against the wall and *then* she stabs him in the gut?

Pity there hadn't been a clock in view. Or maybe there had been a digital readout or something on that gigantic entertainment center, but Keighley hadn't been able to see it.

But there was the newscaster's voice: assuming that thirty years or so from now people still spoke coherent English sentences, she might be able to piece the fragments together in order and find out what was cause and what effect. She took the soup pot off the fire and put the bones to drain in the colander, and went out to rummage in her desk for three-by-five cards. They still shuffled faster than computer entries, at least under her hands, and her desk had a bigger desktop than her monitor. She entered each vision onto its own card and laid them out like a sparse Tarot deck: no guessing as to sequence yet. And the phone rang. "Bracton."

"Keighley, Marsha. I've got a scheme."

"Okay, tell me." Did the head-banging come just before the knife? It sure as blazes couldn't have come after.

"There's a project to raise funds to rebuild the Playhouse, you know about that?"

"Uh-huh." The little theatre building where Marsha's group performed had taken heavy damage in the earthquake and been closed ever since, and "rebuild" was probably a euphemism for "tear down to the ground and start over." Keighley flipped the cards again. "How much?"

"One script. No, listen. We're going to do a benefit performance in the Unitarian Church where we've been performing since the quake. If you could write us a new play full of the good feelings of the season without specifically mentioning babies in mangers —"

"A fantasy?"

"Sure."

"And I keep the rights."

"Of course."

And one of today's rain-soaked ideas would make a much better play than a story. "Okay, I will. But Christmas, jeez, that's less than a month and you'll need time to rehearse. I better get cracking."

When it was time to strip the turkey, she took a pen and a stack of cards into the kitchen: they would live there till this was settled. In the red kitchen the woman stood alone, weeping with her face to the wall, and a different newscaster was saying "— closed down forty-one today, at 2102. To think it was only two years ago that it peaked at eigh —"

Cripes. Was he talking about the Dow? Peaking at eight thousand and something? No wonder it'd come down again. Up like a rocket, down like the stick. No wonder those two were going to be under stress: not that it excused them.

Keighley wrote on the top card of her stack and put the rest on the corner of the drainboard. She picked out the turkey meat and carefully wrapped the bones so the cat couldn't get at them. What was she going to do about those two? Leave a letter for them, "To Whom It May Concern: Stop acting like idiots"? Cross-stitch a text and leave it on the wall, "Thou Shalt Do No Murder"? Well, duh, as the kids said in the supermarket. Those two had presumably heard that already. Keighley looked at the wall where the woman had leaned, was going to lean; rested her own forehead there. It was cool; the heat of passionate tears had not made the trip back with their image. Keighley went back to the computer and began plotting.

Artwork by Gail Butler

The play took shape quickly. The protagonists were a King and Queen who had made a political marriage like Ferdinand and Isabella, but their personal squabbles threatened to tear the united realm into more pieces than the original two. Magical undercurrents made the strife in the Royal House manifest itself as fire, flood, and earthquake, just as in all the best tales. She brought them to the brink of war before they were recon-

Artwork by Gail Butler

ciled, their quarrelsome natures defused, by the innocence of a little child — no, not their own baby, that would have been much too trite, but the kitchenmaid's daughter. She shaped her cast of characters according to the actors Marsha had available. She made less progress with her attempt to order the fragments she saw: they were too widely spaced; the woman never wore the same dress twice.

On the last day of November she stepped into the kitchen and heard the man shout, "Who is he?" waving a page of printout under the woman's nose, an email message it appeared — and Keighley thought, *Aha, so that's it*, and realized the man's jealousy explained not only his actions, but some of the King's. In fact, the fragmentary drama in the kitchen was informing the play with all kinds of storm and passion, and why not. They began rehearsal the first weekend in December.

Keighley slipped into the kitchen, keys in hand, to leave a glass in the sink. The woman sat in a chair, remote in hand, watching opera on the big television: 18th century costumes; Mozart; the last few bars of an aria. When it ended the woman pressed a button and the scene jumped back, without click or rewind blur, to the beginning. "Mi tradì quest'alma ingrata —" over and over again. Keighley drove to the rehearsal musing on betrayal, on grudges long-held, on revenge served on ice like an oyster, and brought out of the parking lot two new lines for the Prime Minister. And the King complained.

The man playing the King was the best actor the group had, a Silicon Valley computer guru: small, neat, light on his feet, with a dapper little beard and blazing green eyes. Not surprisingly, he had an ego the size of the planet Ceres, and though Keighley was happy to give him a part to tear a cat in, with many fine speeches, he always wanted more. She began to see him at odd moments in dark corners, head-to-head with Marsha, wheedling for this concession, that script change, the other bit of favorable blocking.

The woman playing the Queen was only a year or two younger than Keighley herself and ought to have learned some sense. But Keighley looked her age, whereas the actress might still be this side of thirty. Part of it was her manner: she floated about and giggled and flirted and got on Keighley's nerves a lot. So, once they were onstage, did the Queen, and it was working very well. It was no trouble to justify the King's rages; Keighley would have been ready to throttle the Queen herself.

She finally let a word slip to Marsha, but the director didn't seem concerned. "Yeah, I see it too," she said, "but I don't think you need to worry too much. They wouldn't be such good actors if they weren't —" she shrugged — "actors."

But in the second week of rehearsal, with their lines down and their blocking set, when it should have been all tightening and fine-tuning, both of them turned on Keighley, wheedling for script changes. Just an extra line here or there: a reaction to someone else's speech that would cap everything he'd said; just another few sentences here, a little stronger language there; couldn't I do X or Y, it would make the scene so much stronger? Finally Keighley grinned wide (not a pretty sight, rather sharklike) and put an arm round each of their shoulders. "Remember what Pilate said to the High Priest?"

"Uh —"

"What I have written, I have written," and went home.

That would make a good epitaph, she

mused, pulling up the steep driveway. *Quod scripsi, scripsi, and not translate it, make 'em guess.* She went into the kitchen for a drink of water, and saw the man on the floor, the knife handle rising out of his chest like an impudent mushroom, while the woman put her hands to her mouth and the television played *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and said, "Beyond 2001 — the 2002 Volvo."

Two thousand *two?* No, that was the model year, they would be in the second half of 2001. Less than a decade away. How in God's name was all that going to happen so fast? Keighley dead, the house sold, the kitchen repainted and murder done, all by 2001?

Dead before 2001, dammit, that was something she hadn't planned for. Keighley would never see nineteen again, but she was healthy and tough and had planned on living into her eighties at least. If the visions were true, there was something wrong, going to be wrong with her, that she didn't know about. Or else she was going to be hit by a truck. And if they weren't true, then there was something wrong with her right now. She dialed her doctor's number, got his voicemail. "Bernie? Keighley. Something's happened to me, I don't know if it's physical or psychological, but it's getting scary. Not quite emergency-room stuff, but I'm going to come in tomorrow and camp out in your waiting room till you can see me."

But when she went in the next morning, no one was there but the nurse. "Oh, hi, Keighley, we got your message. But Bernie won't be in today, he went to a conference in San Francisco. Would you like a referral to another doctor?"

"No." It was going to be hard enough explaining this to Bernie, who'd known her for years: walk in off the street into a strange doctor's office, and what could he think but *Another postmenopausal California nut case*? "No, thanks. He'll be back tomorrow?"

"Yeah, and —" the nurse flipped pages — "his ten o'clock cancelled, so you can have her appointment."

"I'll take it."

She might have done better to go home and stay there, avoiding the kitchen — or go to a motel and stay there, avoiding everything. But she had a cat to feed and pages to write and a routine to follow, and she did. And in the evening she went to the rehearsal.

The day's dark visions had been uninformative: the man, muttering "Bitch, bitch, bitch" while filling a coffeepot with water from the sink; the woman striding past from back door to console, while a commercial blared, to turn it off with a slap. It occurred to Keighley she'd never seen a vision of the kitchen empty; whatever was displaying these flashes of the future was selecting for dramatic filmclips, knifings and bludgeonings, or at least a cross word.

She dug around in her books, stalked and found a quotation from C. S. Lewis. "The less you think of them as *your dreams* and the more you think of them — well, as News — the better you'll feel about them." But it wasn't true. Keighley in any case only listened to news when there was a war, and it seldom made her feel better: listening was only less dreadful than not listening.

Before the rehearsal began she told herself these were only human dynamics, after all: conflict, the stuff plots were made of. She would sit back and observe. The King there in the corner — well, okay, the actor playing him — chatting with someone in the shadows that Keighley couldn't see. No, there she was, Marsha's nine-year-old daughter who played the kitchenmaid's child who put everything right. Surely the King — but no, Keighley had known him for years and he had always limited himself to women between the age of consent and the age of common sense — say, forty. No, she could trust that he was only making conversation.

Where was Marsha, though? Just coming in the door, with an armload of props, cloaks and swords and a couple of really spiffy coronets borrowed from a colleague who moonlighted as the Baron of Darkwood in the SCA. She set them on a table, and the cast wandered over to see what Santa Claus had brought them.

Except for the Queen and the King's huntsmen, who were hanging around upstage right, leaning on a piano that hadn't gotten moved away yet. Heads together, whispering unheard under the mixed noises in the foreground, planning a rendezvous or an end run around someone else's lines. The Queen had a slip of paper in her hand; they looked down at it, then up towards Keighley, and smiled.

The King had found his crown — jeweled brass that well-polished would pass for gold — and settled it over his temples. He glanced at the Queen, and at Keighley, and smiled into the darkness.

"Let's get going," Marsha said. "Wear your crowns or not, I don't care. Remember to take the aspirin forty-five minutes before the crown goes on. Places for Scene 1."

The players converged from the corners of the stage. King and Queen took the folding chairs that stood for thrones, Prime Minister to their right, herald to their left. Elizabeth the kitchenmaid took Marsha's daughter by the hand and drew her to one side; they weren't in this scene.

Courtiers massed in midstage, murmuring and shifting and trying to upstage each other in despite of blocking that had been set for a week. They turned and shifted, glancing at Keighley and away, while the shadows gathered out of the corners and the King on his throne smiled and smiled, glancing at one of his subjects and another, while they shifted and turned and looked away —

"That's enough!" The voice was harsh, unsteady on the breath. "Do you think I don't see you? Do you think you're fooling me? I've seen it coming and it won't work. Forget it. You can do what you like with each other, but you won't mess with me or my work." The voice was her own. The shadows had closed in till all she could see was the King's face, his expression blank and mild, *Who, me?* "And *you* can quit smirking —!"

They were all silent. Her vision had cleared somehow and she could see them all staring at her, shocked and quiet.

Then the kitchenmaid's daughter tugged her hand free and stepped out of her corner. She crossed the stage with the blocking Marsha had given her for Scene 12, and the crowd fell back to let her pass. She took her place downstage and said, not the lines Keighley had written for her, but "Aunt Keighley, you're sick. Is your forehead hot? I think you should go home and go to bed."

"Right." She turned away, looking for the steps. "Sorry." And she slipped away out of the hall, away from the silence. She went home shivering, and took a long hot shower and still shivered. Her courage failing her, she didn't attempt the kitchen, but filled a glass at the bathroom sink and took it up to the loft. The child was right, she was sick, infected already with whatever was

going to drive those two in the future to madness and murder. Something physical, or psychological? Bernie would figure it out: or if he couldn't, if there was a curse on the house beyond the power of medicine, there was always Mike Carey. If only the day would come.

She slept fitfully, with dreams full of shadows and mocking faces. She woke early and thought only of escape: not even for coffee would she go into that kitchen. She could go get breakfast at a café, or the doughnut factory — no, what about Rhadamanthos? In the end she called him till he came out of the kitchen, dancing with the swinging door, fur bristling, and popped him into the car. They got doughnuts, indifferent coffee, canned cat food from the twenty-four-hour Safeway and ate it parked in Bernie's parking lot, waiting for the office to open.

Bernie was old and huge and shapeless, seemingly wider than he was tall, like Nero Wolfe or a toad. And like the toad in the bestiary, he carried a precious jewel in his head: wisdom distilled from many decades of practicing medicine. He had dozens of detective stories to tell, tales of bizarre diagnoses come upon by shrewd and patient questioning. He listened to Keighley's story, saying "Hmmm." He looked at her eyes and her mouth and her skin and listened to her heart and lungs. Then he flipped back through her file (two inches thick) to the first pages, the medical history he had taken over three hours when she was first his patient. "Nothing like this ever happened before? No, I didn't think so. Anyone in your family? I have a note here about your Aunt Grace —"

"Aunt Grace had twenty-one cats and wouldn't eat meat or wear leather. Around here, that's practically normal. And she was as sharp as a tack, and never had sudden fits of paranoia."

"Hmmm. The place where you were rehearsing. Is it a new building? New carpets maybe?"

"It's the Unitarian Church on San Ramon — built in the 1950s, from the look of it. No carpets at all in the auditorium. You're thinking of solvents? I couldn't smell anything."

"Hmmm. You live 'way up in the hills, don't you? Do you get city water, or have you got a well?"

"I have a well. I've only just started using it again since the rains came back. During the drought I drank Alhambra and had a little tank trucked in to keep the plants alive. But I also used my well before the drought began, and none of this happened then."

"Hmmm. Well, I'd like you to see if you can get your water tested. And I want to get a blood sample and a urine sample, and you can call after ten tomorrow for the results. Try and find out if there's been anything dumped uphill of you, maybe after the drought began. Because the last time I saw anything like this, it was a dentist with sloppy lab technique who'd gotten mercury poisoning from mixing his own fillings."

"Mercury! Yucch. That's the Mad Hatter's madness, isn't it? From working felt processed with the stuff. Bernie, I think you've hit it. Anything we can do?"

"There are some treatments we can use, chelating agents and stuff. That's if the tests come out positive. Try and find out about your well. Drink bottled water till you do."

"Okay; I know somebody who can pull some strings." She left several gills of body fluids with the nurse, and went in search of Carla.

Carla cultivated the city government like a garden, the way another middle-aged lady might have the church or the Women's Institute. She found a chemist for the sample of well water, a friend in the USGS for the geologic maps of Keighley's hillside, two environmental watchdogs to look for signs of illicit dumping, and a local historian named Ted. "Las Casas Road?" he asked. "Wasn't that the Trumbull Mine? No, it was farther up." He peered at the map. "I don't think that road's even got a name, but it's up there. 1925 to 1931, that was." His pencil point hovered over a dip in the contour lines. "This little canyon here. Maybe we should go take a look?"

"What were they mining there?" Carla put in. "We're hunting mercury, remember."

"Trumbull was hunting gold," Ted said. "If he found any, well, they used mercury to extract it. Let's go. Your car or mine?"

"Mine," said Carla. They dropped Rhadamanthos at her house and took her Land-Rover up the hill.

"I think this is the right place," Ted muttered twenty minutes later, comparing the cliffs that rose on their right with the contour lines on his map.

"I think so too," said Keighley, clinging to a twisted oak and peering down the hillside. "See that white patch down there? That's my roof."

"There used to be a road here, all right," Carla said. "But I don't think even the Land-Rover'll make it through all this second growth. C'mon, it's this way." She led the way through clumps of prickly bush and slender trees, avoiding the scarlet poison oak as best she could. A hundred yards farther on the brush thinned; water had washed away most of the topsoil. A little creek ran out of the canyon, flattened out into a wet muddy spot and disappeared beneath the undergrowth. Piles of weathered rock and earth lined the path to a cave mouth in the cliff's side: cautiously

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they stepped inside, to find that the ceiling had fallen a scant dozen feet from the opening, blocking the passage.

"This looks fresh," Carla said, touching a rock imbedded in the fallen earth and watching it tumble to the ground in a shower of dust. "Probably fell in the earthquake. We won't get any farther today."

"It's the tailings outside we want samples of anyway," Ted said. "That's where the mercury would've been used. If it's mercury."

They took samples of rock and earth from several of the piles. There were no deadly little silver droplets to be seen, but there wouldn't be; the testing services would have to perform their arcana to extract the golden answers from the twice-tried ore. Carla had them lined up already.

"If we're right, it's going to have to be hauled away," she said. "I dunno if I can get the county to pay for it, though I'll certainly give it a try. Who owns the land now?"

"It's possible I do," Keighley said. "The plot runs six hundred feet uphill from Las Casas. I'll pay for it anyway if I have to. If it's mercury."

"You're sounding awfully chipper about the whole thing," Carla observed. "You act as if finding mercury would be *good* news."

"Compared to the alternatives, sure," Keighley said. "My cousin Ruth went to the doctor once with mysterious pains in her hands and feet. Turned out to be diabetes; she was awfully relieved. She'd been thinking brain tumors. Mercury, we can do something about; Bernie says so."

They returned to the flats and Carla took the samples away to be tested while Ted went back to his books. Keighley collected her car and her cat and bought four gallons of Black Mountain water at the Safeway. She was just this side of singing and dancing as she opened the front door and lugged in her load of water, twenty pounds of it. Mercury, lovely poisonous mercury, that was the culprit; Carla's testers would find it in the soil, in the water; Bernie would find it in her blood and set about getting rid of it. Nobody was going to die of poison in her house, nobody was going to go mad as a hatter and do murder in her kitchen.

Her hands full of plastic jugs, she backed into the kitchen and turned to face a forest of fragments. Rippling like silk in the wind — but there was no wind — a torrent of faces, motions, hands and eyes, lights and shapes without meaning or name. She backed out again and set the jugs on the floor; but then she must creep in again, as into a roomful of flames, to get a drinking glass and Rhadamanthos's water dish. She filled them from the plastic jug,

Artwork by Gail Butler

sitting on the floor, and they drank. They'd camp in here as long as they had to, drinking Black Mountain till she could get Alhambra delivery set up again, and eat at McDoggie's or out of cans. Rhadamanthos would get spoiled, refuse to eat the dry cat food out of the gravity-feeder; she didn't care.

C. S. Lewis was right after all. It wasn't her mind: it was News about her mind, or News about what the future was going to do to it, and because it was in a way no longer her responsibility she could look at it calmly.

Things were falling into place now. The earthquake had shaken up the hillside and changed the flow patterns in the hidden strata: when the rains came back, the water was able for the first time to flow from the tailings into the well. And it was on those days that she had seen the first visions, a token of things to come.

You could liken the future to a spreadsheet: enter some value into line One and watch the numbers ripple forward to line Ninety-Nine, next year's figures derived from today's by some rational process. But take away the premise — years of unwitting consumption of tainted water — and the conclusion fell apart. The future was in flux, at least for Keighley and her successors in this house; and we are both bound and free.

It might be days or weeks before things settled down, before Keighley's determination to drink no more well water, to haul the tailings away, rippled forward across the cells and made her future clear again. Or it might be as soon as tomorrow, when the test results came in.

Meanwhile, she'd not chance another embarrassing scene like last night's. She called a florist and a caterer, and sent the Unitarian auditorium a sheaf of roses and a note saying, "Sorry. Keighley," and a smorgasbord and a tub of Calistoga water. Another caterer made the trip up the hill with boeuf bourguignon for two and a quart of ginger ale.

"We struck out on the well, hit a home run on the tailings," Carla said the next morning. "Those piles are lousy with the stuff; Trumbull must've been using way too much, no wonder he went broke. Practically nothing in the water, though; he's got ultra-sensitive equipment, he found a trace. Not enough to do you any harm, though; you must've caught it in time."

"I've got good news and bad news," Bernie said. "The good news is, there's nothing in your blood: no detectable mercury, no detectable cell damage. The bad news is, there's nothing in your blood. Maybe we're barking up the wrong tree —"

"I doubt it," Keighley said, and told him about the soil tests. No point in mentioning the fluxing fragments in the kitchen, not yet, not unless they didn't go away. Madness from mercury in the brain, that was a medical problem, unlike madness from mercury in the indefinite future.

Opening night overflowed with publicity, with enthusiasm, with champagne, and even a reasonable take at the box office. Nobody mentioned anyone's temporary aberrations. The local papers took photos of the King and the Queen and the kitchenmaid's daughter and even of Keighley, and she got her own curtain call.

The house was dark when she got home, no flickering at the kitchen windows, and Rhadamanthos opened one eye and closed it again, tucking his tailtip over his nose. Keighley took a deep breath and opened the kitchen door.

A blaze of daylight: the white walls had taken on green trim and painted trellises hung with ivy where walls joined ceiling. The television was the size of a bedsheet and nearly as flat; a gateleg table had been folded and set aside so that three small children could mimic the steps of the folk dancers on the screen, in a future much farther along than 2001. The light dimmed, faded to black. There would be no more visions. Keighley flipped the light switch and put her souvenirs, a doggie box of pickled mushrooms and a half-litre of champagne, into the fridge. ❄

DOROTHY J. HEYDT in the recent **SWORD AND SORCERESS XV** says she has three carts. She would like it made clear that she has three **cats,** or they have her, and that everything else is still same-old-same-old, except that with the abettance of her daughter she recently got the living room cleaned up. Next, the kitchen. *Morgen die ganze Welt!* Ooops, sorry. Her novel **A POINT OF HONOR** is out from DAW and getting many favorable comments.

GAIL BUTLER is well-known in the Northwest as an artist and a fan. She is an ex-military-wife, musician, barber, and an antique restorer as well as an expert at drawing figures and animals. In her spare time she is a volunteer Jewish mother to Northwest art fandom.

The Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"Some Enchanted Evening" by Yvonne Coats**
- 2nd Place: **"The Valley of Stones" by Patricia Duffy Novak**
- 3rd Place: **"Forever and Aye" by E. A. Minogue**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Margaret Organ-Kean for "Some Enchanted Evening"**
- 2nd Place: **David A. Cherry for "Escape Artists" and K. L. Darnell for "The Valley of Stones"**
- 3rd Place: **Lori Dietrick for "The House in the Hollow" and Julia Lacquement for "Forever and Aye"**

Congratulations to all the winners! To vote for your favorites in *this* issue, use the ballot on page 64.

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It's inventory clearance time, and the back issues must go!!

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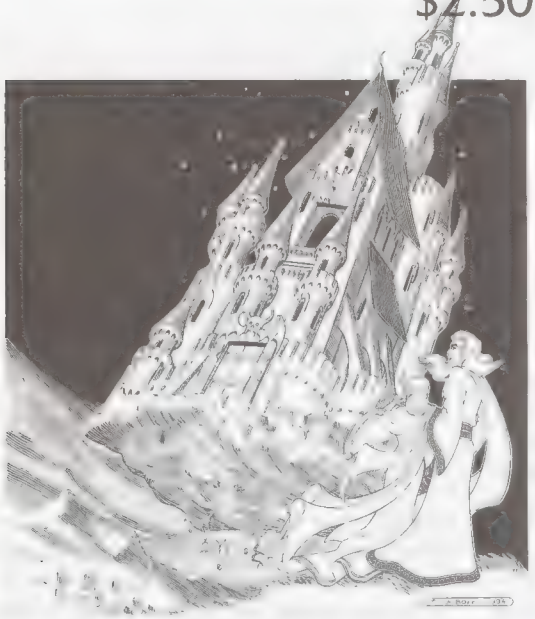

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Neighborhood Watch

by Lee Martindale

I thought it was a joke. Honest to God, I thought the guys in the watch were pulling my leg.

And it's not that I don't take neighbor complaints seriously — I do. The bust that got me my detective's shield was the result of a lady who smelled ether coming from the apartment downstairs.

The old guy who called this one in was one of those who call 911 every time someone in the neighborhood sneezes funny. As near as I could figure, he hadn't gotten what I call the "busybody" lecture because he was 1) male, 2) the uncle of one of the deputy chiefs, and 3) a retired cop himself. And every so often, one of his calls panned out. Often enough that the dispatchers didn't just blow him off, at any rate. Which is why I stood diligently making notes by the yellow light on his front porch and desperately trying to keep a straight face while, in the back of my mind, I plotted getbacks at Castelon and Rodriguez.

I thanked the old man and went back to my car, knowing full well he was watching every step. I radioed the dispatcher and told her I had finished the initial interview and would be talking to several more of the neighbors.

Five houses later, I felt pretty sure that the old man was still watching me from that front window of his house. I didn't think of this until later, but at the same time, I had the feeling that I was also being watched from the last house on my list.

Over the doorbell was a neat note that looked handlettered in that fancy kind of writing called calligraphy: "Day Sleeper — Please Do Not Disturb". Probably works third shift, I thought, and tucked the detail away as one possible explanation for the old man's suspicions. Well, it was close to nine o'clock at night, and I was pretty sure I wasn't putting anyone out. Correction: this whole thing was too silly not to be putting a lot of people out. That getback list on the back burner got a little longer.

It surprised me a little when the door was opened, not the crack permitted by a chain, but all the way. Wide open. Inside stood a woman who matched the description the old man had given me. "Yes?" The voice was low, both in pitch and volume.

"Good evening," I began, pulling the shield case out of my breast pocket and opening it to her view. "I'm Detective Mike Whitaker, Police Department. I'm doing a follow-up on a report we received and wondered if you'd have a few minutes to talk with me?"

Her eyes, the palest grey I've ever seen, never left mine, but it felt as if she was looking me up and down and sizing me up. She smiled slightly and said, "Good evening, detective. I'm Ellen Moore." I thanked her as she stepped aside and gestured me into the living room, then indicated an overstuffed sofa in an old-fashioned tapestry print. I sat down when she did, in an armchair that matched the sofa.

"Now, Detective Whitaker, how may I help you?"

"I noticed there's a sign by the doorbell. Your husband works at night?"

"I've not been married for many years," she answered. "I'm a writer who, over the years, developed the habit of sleeping during the day and working during the quiet hours of the night."

I made a note as she spoke, then glanced up to see if there was a reaction. There wasn't. "What kind of writer? What sort of thing do you write?"

"Primarily gothic romances, with a few horror and fantasy tales here and there. I write under several different pen names."

"I'm sorry to say I probably wouldn't recognize any of them," I said, "I usually pick up a techno-thriller on those rare occasions I have time to read." She merely smiled.

I took a minute to look around. On the outside, the house looked like the rest of the tiny frame houses on the block — built in the '50s, painted white with colored trim. On the inside, it was all fine wood and old books, antique furniture and the smell of lemon oil and flowers.

My eyes returned to the woman seated across from me, and she indi-

cated the notebook in my hand with a glance. "Perhaps I could be more helpful if you would tell me what kind of complaint you're investigating?"

I flipped back a few pages in my notes. "About three months ago some of your neighbors started losing their dogs. All big ones, like the Doberman in the next block and the pitbulls across the alley from this house. In most cases, there'd been noise complaints — the dogs barking all night, and all of them had a history of jumping the fence and running the neighborhood in a pack. As near as the owners could tell us, they all came up missing between midnight and four or four-thirty in the morning."

"Does Animal Control run a graveyard shift?"

I chuckled. "Not that I know of."

"Perhaps someone has taken it upon himself to eliminate a neighborhood nuisance."

"That's one theory that's been given," I chuckled again. "There's another piece of information that, since you work at night, maybe you're in a position to corroborate. Have you ever noticed someone out on foot between the hours of midnight and four or four-thirty in the morning?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not in a position to be of much assistance. My office is in the back of the house, and its window faces the back lawn."

I wrote a note. "Do you ever go out during those hours?" There was a 24-hour supermarket two blocks away, the post office was about a mile in the other direction.

She smiled again slightly and paused. "I suppose I do. Yes, now that I think of it, several times a week."

I caught myself looking into those grey eyes. I gave myself a little mental shake and asked the next question. "On those times you do go out, do you drive or walk?"

"Usually I walk. It's very good exercise, you know."

"Aren't you afraid to be out on the streets at that hour?"

She looked at me levelly before answering simply, "No." Just like she hadn't been afraid to open that front door all the way without the protection of a chain. An almost matter-of-fact lack of fear. Another thought popped up from the back of my mind; someone this confident, this different, usually tripped suspicions in people like the old man.

"When you've been out, do you recall meeting anyone else on foot?"

She thought for a moment. "Once or twice, a small group of teenagers. I'm sure you've seen the sort — faces made up very pale, black lipstick, heavy eye

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

makeup, clothed almost always in black lace and leather. Usually found around movie theaters, milling around until they can rush into the darkness to worship the latest cinematic incarnation of bloodlust?"

I nodded that I did, indeed, know the type. "Anyone else?"

"Perhaps," she answered, then paused before adding, "although I really don't pay that much attention. Even when I'm running an errand, I'm writing." She leaned forward in her chair and held my eyes as if confiding a secret. "The night is my time, Detective. The stillness, the quality of the light, the very taste of the air. The darkness, the night, is the loom on which I weave my words." Suddenly she smiled and sat back, and I found the loss of the momentary mood almost painful. "But then surely you know that some writers have their little ... eccentricities. Being a night person may be mine." She glanced at the notebook again. "Surely the disappearance of some dogs isn't the reason you're here."

"There's more to this one, yes." I flipped another page. "Two nights ago, the elderly woman next door woke up about three a.m. and found a burglar in her house. She sleeps with the bedroom lights on, so she got a good look at him. He started toward her with a knife. She says that all of a sudden a woman's voice told him, somewhat forcefully, to leave immediately. She said it sounded like the woman speaking was in the room with them, and when the burglar looked around and didn't see anyone else there, he dropped the knife and took off."

"And ..."

The next part I delivered looking straight at her. "On last night's news there was a story about a body found in a dumpster behind the Tom Thumb. The description of the body matched the one of the burglar the widow gave another neighbor. The coroner placed time of death at a little after three a.m. the night before. When this other neighbor heard it, he called us."

"How did the man die?"

"That information hasn't been released yet." The only reaction I saw was a slight nod.

"And I thought this was going to be a peaceful neighborhood when I moved here."

"When did you move here, Ms. Moore?" I asked as casually as I could manage.

The smile was a little too easy for my comfort. "Coincidentally enough, a bit more than three months ago. Now, from

Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

disappearing dogs to dead men is quite a jump. I've already told you I could be of little assistance to you. There is more, then?"

"Well, to be honest," and the look of embarrassment I gave her was not entirely faked, "we've had a report about you being what we would term a suspicious person."

One delicate eyebrow arched toward her hairline. She looked at me for a long moment with what I can only describe as cool elegance. "How very interesting. Suspicious in what respect?"

I couldn't help it, and there's no other word for it ... I blushed. I was eight years old and sitting on the business end of the principal's desk. And there wasn't any way to word it without coming off like a lunatic. "At least one of your neighbors believes you're a vampire."

She didn't get angry, she didn't look surprised, she didn't react in any of the ways I've seen people react to being accused of the impossible. She laughed. When she turned her attention back to me, the features had returned to a pleasant smile, but those remarkable eyes were almost dancing. "Detective Whitaker, do I look like the stereotypical vampire to you?"

I looked back at her. The answer to that was obvious. She was short and plump to the point of being fat. Except that, even as I said that last word in my mind, it didn't feel like an insult — it was merely a description, or maybe more of a compliment. The way the word used to be used, or how it still was when what was being described wasn't a human body.

Abundance. Ripeness. Satisfying richness. Replete with life.

I caught myself and pulled my thoughts back out of the tangent. "No, you don't look much like a vampire."

"If I may say so, you fit the description far better than I. You are tall, gaunt, sharp-featured and, based on my limited observation of your walk, graceful in the manner of fencing masters or dance instructors. Your carriage, as much as that well-tailored three-piece suit you're wearing, gives you every appearance of being someone out of his natural time. Does anyone ever accuse you of being a vampire, Detective Whitaker?"

It was an amusing thought, but I understood the point she was going for. "No ... although I've had my sexual preference questioned a time or two."

She chuckled. "Stereotypes are interesting, don't you think? If I were plotting the obligatory vampire novel, this little situation would be exquisite."

She rose from her chair and began pacing slowly in front of the fireplace as she continued to speak. "The main character — a female member of the undead. And her most powerful protection? Modern society's fascination with those timeless beings. After all, everyone knows what a vampire looks like; in all the movies, all the books, vampires are pale, slim, wraithlike creatures. The myths have always had it that way, and the popularization of vampires has done nothing so much as perpetuate the myths. The ... stereotypes, if you will." She paused and looked at me as if to be sure I had marked the point. I had.

"Who, then, would believe that this main character, who is what this same modern society judgmentally labels 'overweight', a vampire? She hides, very successfully, behind both sets of stereotypes. So what if no one ever sees her eating. 'Oh, I'm on a diet' is the expected answer from a fat woman. Let's say she's even more daring and explains it with something on the order of 'I always drink my meals.' Who hasn't heard of those vile little flavored meal-replacement shakes? And the nocturnal lifestyle? A woman who works at night is no longer any more remarkable than a woman working at what used to be considered a man's job. Frankly, Detective, today would be the very best time to be a fat female vampire. No one would believe it."

I was staring at her now, at her generous curves draped in soft wool of no discernable style beyond a vague hint of anachronism. I was watching her move, back and forth in front of the hearth. Her movements, like her dress, hinted at other times. She flowed — a floating grace totally unlike the slinking clomping gait I saw in most women of her size. There was an air of the archaic about her as much as about the room in which we sat. Ellen Moore wasn't just a time-bubbled ghost or an eccentric writer. She was ...

"Yes." Just that single word whispered so low I almost missed it.

I swallowed hard. Somewhere I found my voice and it came out far steadier than I was feeling or ever imagined it could. "Let's say you were writing this as a vampire novel. Would the old man who told his suspicions to the police be in any danger from yo ... your main character?"

She slid back into the armchair and watched me with a look that was somewhere been pity and amusement. "None at all."

"What about the woman next door?"

"The same. I would imagine that my main character grew up as I did, with many of the values about family and honor that have gotten lost in modern times. One of those is reverence for the old. They are to be protected, not victimized. Most of the people in this neighborhood are old. And this is my neighborhood now." She smiled, this time in reassurance.

I looked around the room, wondering how to frame my last question. "In your novel, the detective who took the call and learned the truth about your main character ... what happens to him?"

She cocked her head to one side and watched me for a minute. Maybe she was deciding my fate. Maybe just letting me sweat before she acted.

"Nothing."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing happens to him. He's very intelligent, this detective, intelligent enough to realize that ... no one would believe him."

Ellen Moore was right. No one would.

❄

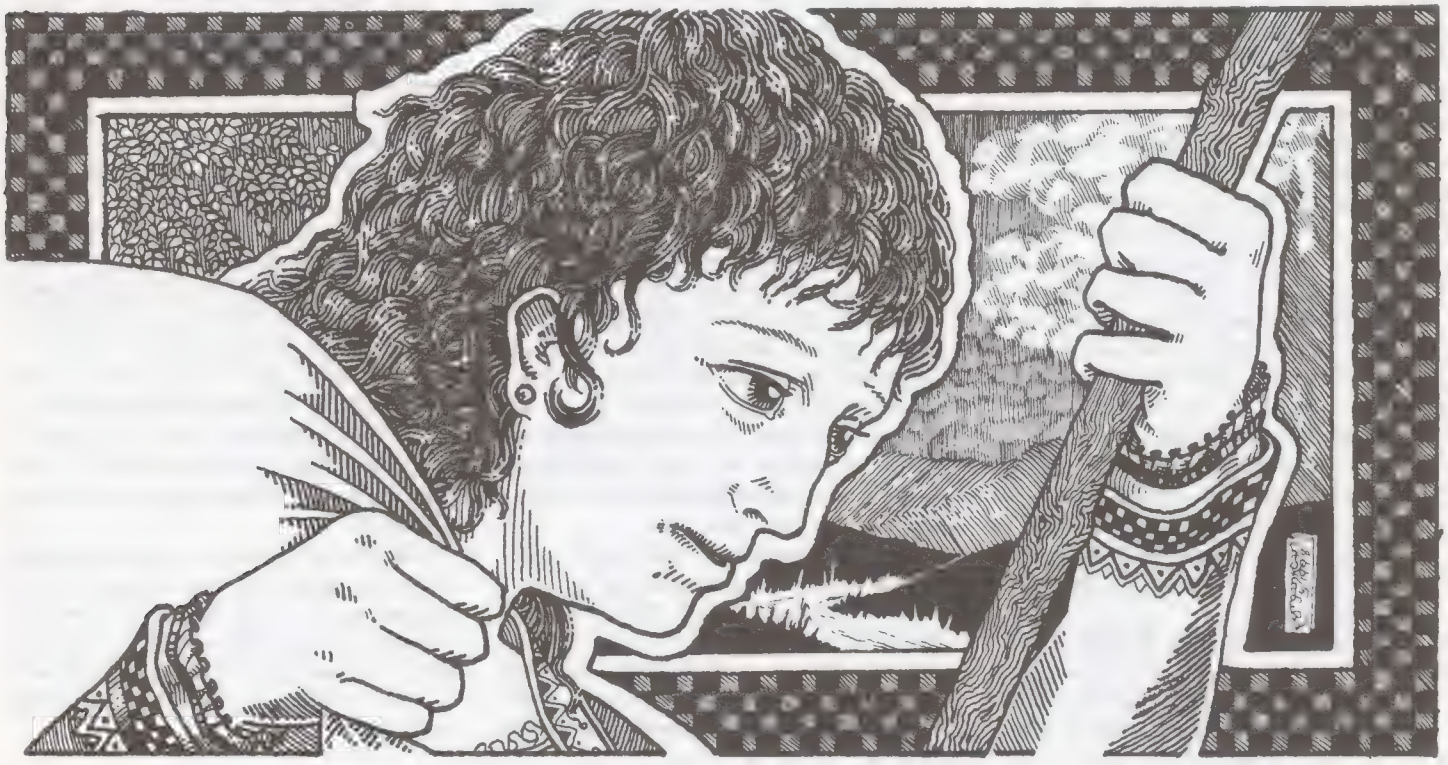
Lee Martindale writes, "To begin, I am unabashedly female, unashamedly 47 and unapologetically fat. Besides being a writer, I'm also a publisher/editor, size rights activist, songwriter, performer, SCA bard and merchant, filker, paraplegic and access advocate. As in my previous bio, my husband still calls me a redheaded "Hell on Wheels" and it's still "quite a marriage". In addition to a fairly respectable list of non-fiction and non-genre credits, my fantasy fiction credits to date consist of "Yearbride" in the **SNOWS OF DARKOVER** anthology, and "Mrs. Bailey's Harp" in *Zone 9 Magazine*." She lives in Dallas, TX, with two cats, one husband and one writing partner.

Vincent Di Fate has always wanted to draw werewolves, vampires, and monsters, but he's mostly known for his spaceships. He received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards.

Fairy Tale

by Julia Watts

I'll tell you a secret. Those old stories, you know the ones that nurses tell their charges to make them go to bed and dream sweet dreams, they're all the same. All those stories, the ones that start with 'once upon a time' and end with 'happily ever after' and involve a handsome prince and a beautiful princess getting — well, whatever seven-year-old minds want to imagine as eternal happiness — they're all the same. And you want to know the worst? They're all lies. Not sweet little white ones you tell to make sure the world treats you nicely. I'm talking fat ones. No getting around it. I know, I know, already you're getting upset with me. Already you're saying, Okay, who died and left you in charge of dispelling illusions? And fine, I'll give you that I may not have all the right credentials. After all, I'm just one little princess and since I'm not the fairest in the land, I know my opinion doesn't count for



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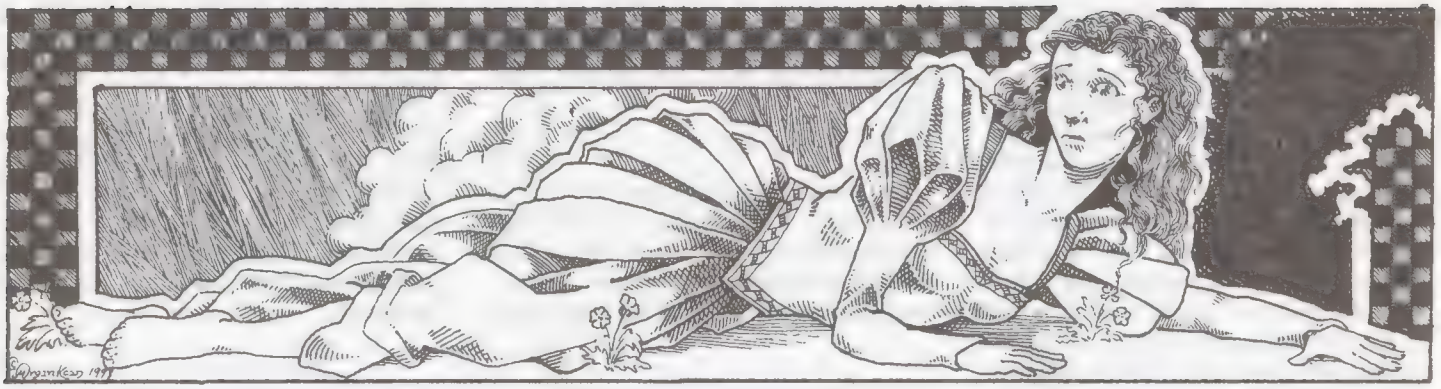

much. So if you want to hear the same old story and be reassured that the world is still full of 'happily ever afters', you'd best flip a few pages and pretend you didn't see this. So here it goes ....

"Once upon a time, there lived a princess." Okay, I know you're already getting suspicious. Not only does it start with those same four words, it's already introduced a princess. But note the absence of a modifier. She was not beautiful, not spoiled, not a stuck-up little tower brat, just a princess. Plain and simple. She lived a fine life, nothing too taxing and nothing too exciting, much to the dismay of the kingdom's gossips, I might add. Her father was not unkind to her, her mother had not died at an early age, and there was no stepfamily in the picture. Already the potential for a fairy tale was sinking into the proverbial mire. But don't lose patience with me, because one fateful day in June, this princess turned sixteen.

To those of you interested in muckraking, I am sorry to report that there was no wicked great-aunt who cursed the babe out of spite and that the same princess had survived several sticks with the spindle of a spinning wheel. However, on the morning of her sixteenth birthday, her father called upon the young princess and delivered a solemn pronouncement.

"My dearest daughter, though it grieves me greatly to lose you, it is only right you travel forth into the world to win the prince that will be your well-deserved husband." This, of course, was a shot in the face of tradition, as it is generally the prince who goes a-wandering in search of his bride, but as her father had entertained no suitors nor been shown even a polite interest in his daughter, he decided to put the matter into her own hands. And having been fed tradition until it sickened her, she was entranced by the novelty of the proposition. The idea of finding her own prince was equally delightful. It is a hideous irony that those who lack the attention of a single suitor would gladly be married, while those who entertain charming suitors daily must be dragged kicking and screaming into marriage against their will.

So on the day following her sixteenth birthday, a day which uncooperatively dawned dull and rainy, she set out to seek her fortune and fulfill her fairy tale. She had been raised to believe that a good heart was enough, that internal beauty was far more enduring than any surface charms, and since she truly had a sweet nature, that she would indeed find the prince of her dreams. As luck would have it, she met a prince not an hour after setting forth. He studied her carefully, but with princely courtesy declined her offer of a courtship. He was looking for a blonde beauty, one whose braids would allow him to climb up into her tower, and he doubted that her brown curls could support his weight. As a side note, he held her singing voice to be inadequate. Nevertheless, she was undaunted.

As night began to fall, she (remembering her nurse's warnings) stopped at the next castle she came to and asked for a night's lodging. The lord of the keep was hardly displeased to see her, though he promptly informed her that he had no intention of waking his son for a wandering princess. She assured him that her intention was pure, though truth be told, she hardly would have minded a peek at the prince. But without voicing her thoughts, she was led to a very comfortable bed. She fell asleep at once and woke the next morning to find a true prince sitting by the bedside, watching her carefully. Overjoyed at the sight, she sat up quickly, forgetting that it does a princess well to rise with languid ease. His face frowned and he sniffed distastefully. "Ah well," he muttered wistfully, "I suppose it was too much to wish for that you'd sleep for a hundred years."

The second day of her journey led her to a charming prince who railed at length about the injustices he had suffered. She comforted him without thought of her own woes and murmured understanding words when he seemed to want a response. He had lost his true love after an ill-fated ball and though our princess offered to serve as a substitute, he declined on account of her foot size. With an understanding smile, she bid him farewell and pointed him in the direction of the nearest stepfamily. It would hardly be seemly to argue with princely standards, even though she found his marriage criterion to be lacking. Clearly he was of the old school.

That night she found herself begging for another place to sleep, this time from a man who seemed far less inclined to believe her story. She understood that her journey had made her questionable features far from the standards of most princesses, but it would hardly have killed him to offer lodging to a damsel in distress no matter what her social standing. After receiving a bed at last, she collapsed into a fitful slumber on account of a lumpy mattress. But the girl had been taught to suffer a guest's hospitality without complaint so she did not ask for another room. Shortly after midnight, weariness overtook her and she slept at last, only to be rudely ushered out before dawn because she lacked the delicate skin and sensibilities of a true princess.

Refusing to be daunted, she began the third day of her journey stalwartly assuring herself that it would certainly hold good fortune. Anyone raised on the stories of old knows that 'the third time's the charm', and being true to her roots, she believed the creed with all

Artwork by Margaret Organ-Kean

her heart. As the princess was walking through a wondrous forest, she spied another prince. She ran toward him and barely restrained herself from flinging his arms around her neck in joy. "Please," she began, "you are the man of my dreams," for over the course of the past night, her dreams had become startlingly less specific. "Tell me what I must do to marry you!" She ran a hand through her coarse hair and tried to muster appropriate charm. But he smiled with an air of infinite sadness and explained ever-so-gently that he was looking for someone who could lead him to the side of a poisoned girl. She sighed, letting the air escape through her teeth with barely veiled impatience, and regretfully informed him that she had seen no dwarfs.

By that evening, she felt she had given her luck more than adequate time to prove true. No longer trusting the safety of castle walls, she decided to rest beneath the light of the moon. But before she managed to fall asleep, she heard soft crying in the woods nearby. I tell you the sight she saw would have warmed a heart of stone, and our princess was more touched than most. Another young woman, her eyes full of tears, looked up at the princess in fright. The girl had narrowly escaped a far worse prince, one who had threatened to kill her slowly if she didn't spin straw into gold. Since she knew no strange little men with stranger long names, and she had lost faith in her luck, she decided there was nothing left to do but run away. The princess sighed sadly after hearing this tale and gave a tremendous sneeze. She had spent much of her afternoon lurking near ponds and the moist air had not agreed with her. "I've kissed seventeen frogs in the past five hours," she said, a touch of bitterness tainting her voice. "I don't have the patience for princes."

And that, dear reader, was the end of that. No princes. No weddings. No fairy tales. I told you so from the start, so don't think I let you down. That's it. The End. What three little words? Ah, you see, that is the little told part of this story. That's the twist, the part the fairy tales never mention. But I suppose if you're twisting my arm .... The princess and the maiden decided they saw very little admirable in princes, at least not from a perspective of prospective wives. And so, with hardly a thought to propriety or tradition, they promptly fell in love with one another, secluded themselves in a beautiful tower overlooking the sea and lived happily ever after.

THE END

❄

Julia Watts is nineteen and lives in Pittsburgh, PA, where she splits her time between working on her novel, medieval reenactments, music, reading, and working at the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force. This is her second sale to *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*.

Margaret Organ-Kean works as a tech writer and systems analyst in addition to her artwork assignments from *Cricket*, *MZBFM*, and Wizards of the Coast (where she illustrated cards in the MAGIC deck, and was the artist and designer for all cards in The Great Dalmuti).

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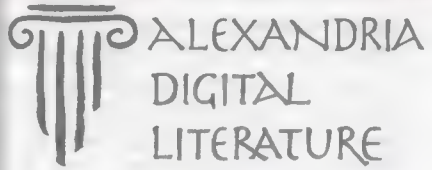

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The Beast Revealed!

by Peggy Ramsey

"Turned into a beast! Is that the story you heard? And by an evil enchantress no less." The old woman snapped a knuckle-sized emerald off the scarred wooden table and snorted. "'Course he blames a woman." She laughed and shook her head.

I balanced my inkpot on my knee and flipped open the cover on my writing case. "So there was no spell?"

"Oh, aye! She just made his outsides match his insides." Her button eyes sparkled. "I kept house for the Beast from the day his father gave him that castle and me with it. Like a troll under a bridge he lurked, waitin' for some addle-pate to pick one of his bleedin' roses. And they wasn't even particularly nice roses." She leaned forward, as if imparting some great secret. "Bugs, he had. Lots and lots o' bugs."

"But what about Beauty?" I prodded.

"I'm gettin' to that one. Don't you get your breeches in a twist." The grimy rag snapped again, this time upending a rather large ruby. "Let me tell you, Beauty's Father wasn't the first one to pick one o' those roses, let me tell you. There's plenty o' brave souls willing enough to trade virgin daughters to spare their own wretched lives. I can just see 'em thinkin' — one less mouth to feed, one less girl to dower."

She shook her head. "When he told me there was another young lady comin' to stay, I made the place nice, best as I could under the circumstances. I liked it not at all, but the Beast's word was law and his father paid me well. Well, Miss Beauty arrived, just as miserable as she was pretty."

"So she was beautiful then?" I asked.

The old woman scowled. "Well she weren't called 'Beauty' fer nothin'! Anyhow, my Lord Beast went into his act, made her feel special and treasured. He was always like that in the beginning. And naturally Miss Beauty fell for it. They all do, those young girls without a thought in their pretty heads. Soon she got the notion that beneath all that fur and horror beat the heart of a poet.

"She fell in love with him. What choice did she have? It was just him, her and me at the castle, and she sure wasn't gonna fall in love with me." Chuckling, she stooped to pick up a largish diamond from behind the chamber pot. "Then the Beast let her go home to visit her family. He went out of his

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

way to convince her that her absence would injure him terribly; if she didn't come back he'd die."

She inclined her head. "Truth was, he was tired of her and ready for the next conquest. That oh-so-benevolent trip home was his way of getting rid of her. It usually worked. While they were here they loved him, but once freedom took hold that magical ring for the return trip wound up at the bottom of the nearest well. But Miss Beauty musta really loved him, because she came back."

She coughed as her feather duster traveled a rack of pickaxes. When the spasm subsided, she continued. "The Beast was out in the garden, fixing the roses for the next victim when she came bouncin' up and planted a kiss on his nasty old lips. He staggered back, stared at her, then his face twisted up and he roared a horrible roar. And just as he was about to ask what she was doing there the spell wore off.

"See, the Enchantress, she weren't no fool." The old woman's gap-toothed grin widened. "She fixed it so's all his beastly attributes would vanish if he convinced a woman to love him completely. By the time Miss Beauty came along, this boy was all beast, and when the spell broke there wasn't nothing left of him but a pile of pretty clothes.

"No one ever hears the real story. The version on the tavern circuit has them living happily ever after. You gotta go way back to hear the one where he dies at the end, and even then they manage to blame it on her. 'Twas Beauty killed the Beast,' they say. Not true. Not true at all.

"Fortunately for me, this job opened up." She placed the seven spoons beside the seven bowls. "The girl that did before me faked her own death, then ran off with a charming prince. Oh, the stories I could tell you."

"Really now?" I fetched out a fresh sheet of parchment. "Tell me."

❄

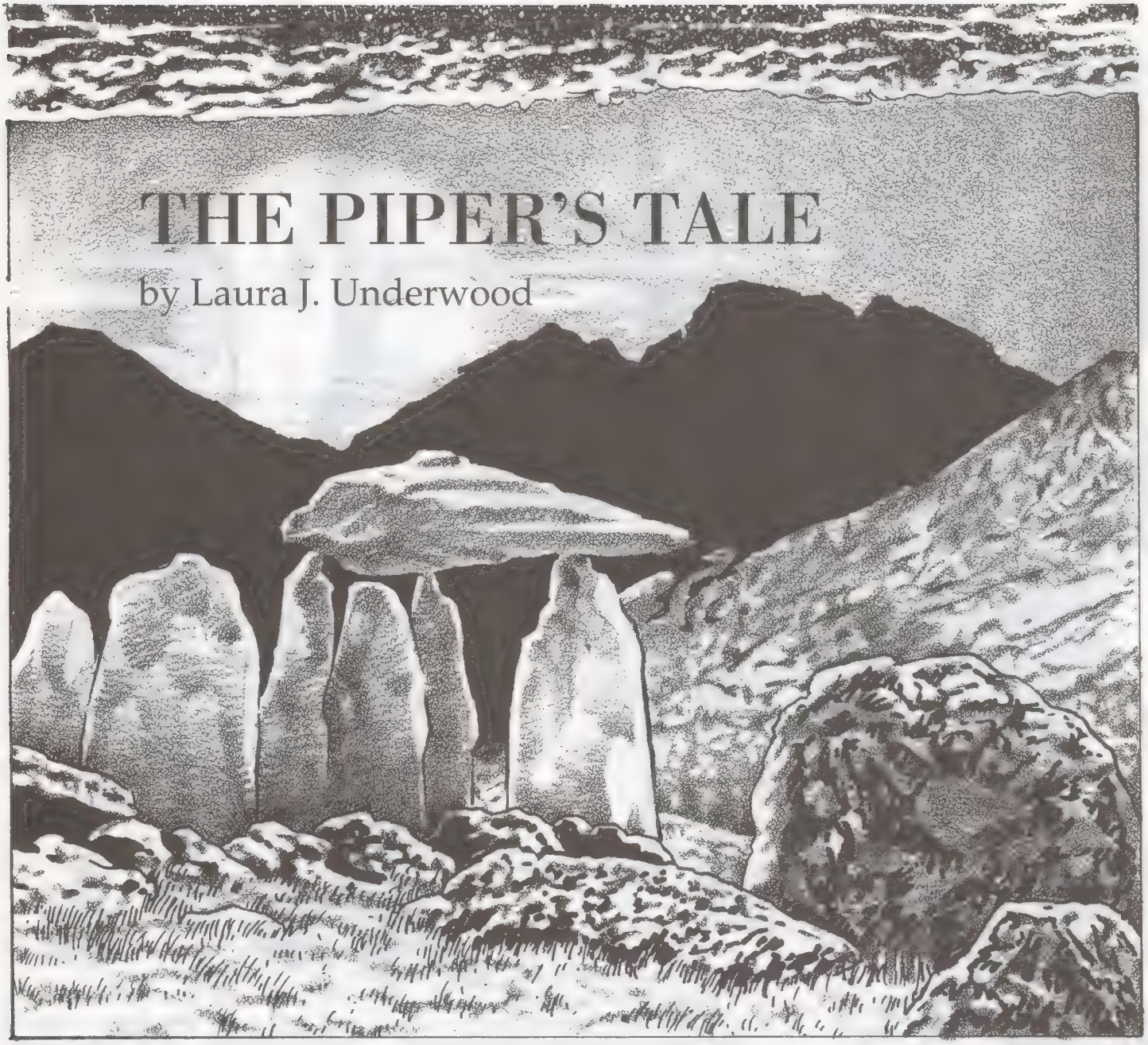
PEGGY RAMSEY writes: "I have published several non-fiction items, but "The Beast Revealed" is my first fiction sale." She has completed one novel and is hard at work on the sequel.

JULIA LACQUEMENT illustrates frequently for these pages.

Artwork by Julia Lacquement

THE PIPER'S TALE

by Laura J. Underwood



A cromlech stood on a ridge above the mouth of the ravine known as Piper's Rift, and it was in the forested glen below that monument that Conor Manahan chose to make camp. The gentle trickle of water that spilled from the ravine pooled near the site, scenting the air with moisture. Though it had been many years since Conor had been to Keltora, let alone this southern range, he remembered the place.

"Are you sure we'll be safe here?" his wife Eithne asked, flashing dark eyes around in dismay.

"It's not a bandit hole, if that's what you mean," Conor said, and fondly brushed a hand through the long black thatch of Rhoyd's hair as the lad helped raise the sercloth tent. "No bandit in his right mind would camp here."

"Then we must not be in our right minds either," Eithne muttered just loud enough for Conor to hear. He grinned. "Isn't that a grave up on the ridge?" she said.

Conor glanced at the stones becoming a silhouette in the fading light, feeling a bit of stubble as he rubbed his own chin. "Just a monument, woman," he said. "No *bones* lie up here, for the man to whom it was set 'twas never found."

That got a sharp look from his wife, and a curious one from the mageborn lad they now called son. Cerulean orbs glanced up at Conor's great height, filled with the sparkle of hope. Rhoyd loved to hear Conor's stories, even if Eithne did not.

"Why wasn't he found?" Rhoyd asked.

"'Tis a tale best told on a full belly and with a bright fire," Conor said and winked.

"I'll lay the fire," Rhoyd said eagerly, bolting off to gather wood.

"Mind you don't go far," Conor insisted.

"No farther than the sight of you, I'll wager," Eithne said. "Is this going to be one of your bogie tales, Conor?"

"Thought you didn't believe in bogies, woman," Conor said.

"I don't," she assured him as he knelt

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

to finish staking the tent. "But Rhoyd is at that age ..."

"Give it a rest, woman," Conor said, shaking his head. "Lads love to be frightened. It makes men of them."

"Really," she said, coming up behind him and brushing aside the long red tail of his hair to run fingers across the stooped nape of his neck. "And here I thought it had something to do with the *way* they were made."

The touch sent fires across his skin. He rose, snagging her arm before she could escape. "Mite early to start that, isn't it, woman?" he said.

"I never knew time of day to stop you," she said, then cocked her head. "Anyway, Rhoyd's coming back."

"He'll have to learn sooner or later ...."

"Oh, leave it, Conor, I've a meal to prepare," she insisted.

He let her slip free and grinned. "That's what I get for marrying a True Healer," he said. "All natter and bustle ..."

"You wish," she said.

Rhoyd was already dumping the wood and setting it into a tent. Once it was settled, he touched a hand to it and whispered, "*Loisg*," and fire flared to life. In no time, there was rabbit stew simmering and scenting the air with its gamey fragrance. Conor hardly finished his share when he found himself under siege. Rhoyd squirmed his way into the mercenary's lap, insisting on hearing the mysterious tale.

"What happened to the man for whom the cromlech was laid?" the lad insisted, getting comfortable.

Conor sighed, grateful when elbows and knees ceased to gouge him. "Well, 'twas long before I was born, lad. Before the Last War ravaged the lands. Before the Unification, when Keltorans were thought no better than wild men who wore naught but kilted plaidies and lived for blood and war."

"You know, I was thinking that very thing myself just last night," Eithne murmured from across the camp where she was stitching a pair of Rhoyd's much worn trews.

"Haud, woman," Conor growled, but she smirked and ignored his warning, as was her way. Rhoyd giggled. "As I was saying," Conor went on, rolling his eyes, "'twas in the days of old when magic filled the world and the Old Ones were still a recent memory. Now, there lived among the clan of MacEwen a piper named Tormod who had no worldly equal. Far and wide, the bards of Keltora recited his praises. He was much sought after by the Lords of the Clans, as no man could match his pibroch ...."

"His what?" Eithne sputtered.

"His piping, woman," Conor said with a frown. "A pibroch is a piper's martial song."

"Oh," she said, her face flushing. "I am sorry, but for a moment, I thought the tale was getting a bit strong for Rhoyd's innocent ears. Do continue." Merriment brightened her eyes as she once more returned to her stitches. Conor made a face, for he could see her shoulders trembling in silent laughter.

"No mortal man could match his playing," Conor began in a firm voice. "He'd brought tears to their eyes and wrapped courage into their hearts with his songs. He'd piped Clan MacEwen into battle, and on to victory. But like many a man whose fame becomes difficult to bear, Tormod found himself constantly faced with his own legend. There were some who said he once used his pipes to force a man to leap off a cliff against his will and perish. Others who thought his skills as a piper hinted too strongly of dark magic. For even before the Unification, there were some who thought magic evil and mageborn a plague."

He felt Rhoyd stiffen. Conor smiled and rubbed the lad's back in reassurance. The mercenary would have killed any man who threatened his adopted son for being mageborn.

"Like some men, he did have a weakness for the *uisge beatha* as a means of forgetting what folks said about him. And it was while he was in his ale one night that he boasted he would take on his greatest challenge. He would play against a piper of the Old Ones and win."

"But the Old Ones were gone by then, weren't they?" Rhoyd insisted.

"Oh, not entirely," Conor said. "There were Old Ones dwelling in parts of Keltora long after most folks thought them gone. They were the last of their kind and, like the Keltorans among whom they lived, the Old Ones were just as fond of a good ceilidh as any man. They too boasted of pipers and harpers whose skill had no match among mortal men.

"Now, there in Piper's Rift, 'twas said to be an entrance to one of the underground kingdoms of the Old Ones, and it was from this place that music could be heard when the moon rose full."

"Like tonight?" Rhoyd said and tossed a furtive glance towards the horizon.

"'Twas long ago, lad," Conor said. "Anyway, Tormod knew this place would gain him access to the Old One's realm, so he came here, armed with naught but his pipes and his long dirk. Many of his clansmen came as well, gathering down here to listen, though none of them dared enter the ravine. At first, they just stood about waiting until they heard the faint sound of pipes giving voice to such an eerie tune. Many a man swore on that fated night to have felt the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. Tormod ignored their fear. He marched straight into the ravine, following the trail to the headwaters, his pipes crying to the wind. A hollow sound it soon became, overshadowing the Seelie songs of the Old Ones.

"At once, the men laid bets. Who would be the victor? Would Tormod outplay the Old Ones, or would he sacrifice his life with his foolish boast? 'Twas thought that some of the Old Ones were as evil as bloodmages, and on this night, many a man was willing to believe that tale true. The wild

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

cries of the pipes continued for hours, one against one, note against note. It seemed like the earthly sound of Tormod's playing was drowning the Old One's mellow songs, when all at once, the tone of Tormod's piping began to change. He was attempting to imitate the eerie tune of the Old Ones' piper, and on his pipes the song began to sound like a cry of woe and pain ... only it was then that the men of Clan MacEwen realized, the song was not that of a pipe at all, but the cry of a man in agony."

Rhoyd's eyes were wide. "What happened?" he insisted.

"Well, some men believe that Tormod had been butchered by the Old Ones, either for imitating them poorly or defeating their piper. None knows to this day as not a man of Clan MacEwen could find the heart to enter the ravine until daybreak. They followed the tracks of Tormod's march up to a rock from under which the headwaters sprang, and there they disappeared. 'Twas naught to be found, not a cave, not a body ... only the chanter from Tormod's pipes, lying broken on the ground in a great swath of blood. Why, to this day, the blood still saturates the ground, and on nights when the moon is full, you can hear the wail of pipes on the wind, and the mournful cries of a man in agony ...."

"Conor!" Eithne snapped.

"What now, woman?" he insisted.

Her dark eyes narrowed perceptibly, settling on Rhoyd. Conor realized the lad was a knot of sinewy muscles wadded as small as he could make himself, hovering and trembling against the mercenary. Conor shook his head, giving Rhoyd a gentle shake.

"It's only a story, lad," Conor said.

"Not a very nice one," Rhoyd said with a mumpish frown, and struggling to right himself so he could cast an accusing glower up at the mercenary.

"What do you mean by that, lad?" Conor insisted.

"I bet Tormod cheated!" Rhoyd said.

"Now, hold on, lad," Conor said with a frown. "Tormod was the greatest piper in all Keltora. He was a man of honor, and I'll not hear him called a cheater by one hasn't even learned to kilt a plaidie ...."

"The Old Ones would never kill mortals without good cause. And they weren't as bad as bloodmages who are more human than mageborn anyway!" The lad's voice was stiff with quiet rage, and Conor could see a tear gliding down one cheek, glistening in the firelight as Rhoyd looked away.

"But, it's only a story," Conor protested.

"Maybe to you, but ... I do feel something here," Rhoyd said. "Something unfinished ..." His voice trailed off.

"I hope you are satisfied, Conor Manahan," Eithne said forcefully, snipping the thread. "He'll not sleep a wink tonight, for you hurting his feelings and telling him that awful tale."

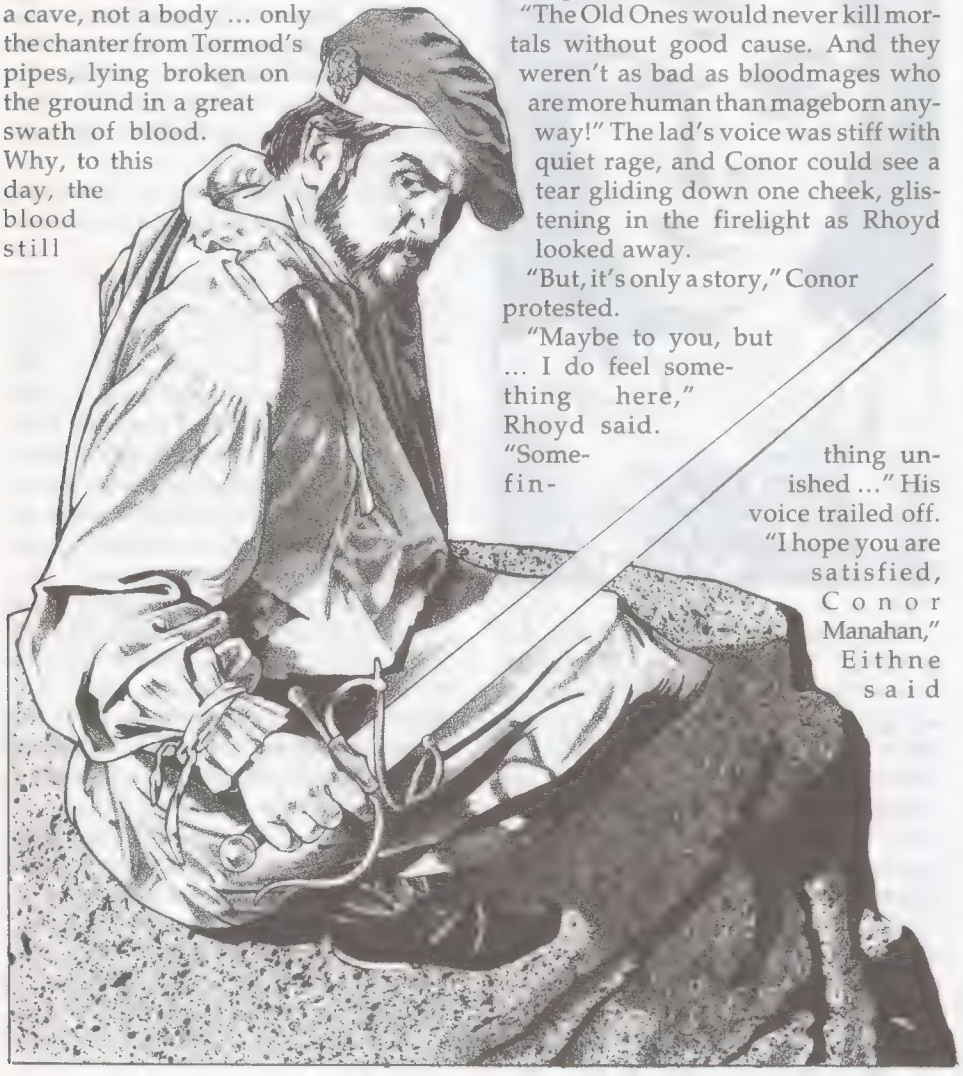
"Oh, yes he will," Conor insisted, hugging Rhoyd. "You forgive me, don't you, lad? Mageborn or not, I'd give my heart's blood to fight for you, and you know that."

Rhoyd nodded his head, but he did not relax, so Conor launched into singing "The Maid That Sold Her Barley," as a distraction. Rhoyd was giggling appreciatively by the end of the song, though Eithne's gaze was as cold as the wind in the nippy little ballad. There'd be no end of grief from her tonight. Still, Conor would rather she was angry over a randy song than a morbid tale. She was less apt to scold him for the former.

Rhoyd soon drifted into sleep. Conor slipped the lad's boots off and wrapped him in blankets in the tent. Eithne crawled into their pallet, and Conor went back to the fire, pulling his own blue and black plaid about his shoulders. He would keep watch a while, though he doubted here they would come to any harm. His warhorse Battlebrute was as good as any hound when it came to warning against intruders. Besides, Conor wanted some time to sit and ponder.

Rhoyd had never seemed so offended by a story before. Conor frowned at the flames as he poked them up with a stick, and felt the heat warm the gold hoops in his ears — souvenirs of his militia days. Granted, the lad was mageborn, and there were a lot of bad feelings against his kind since the Last War when that dreadful bloodmage Cudraeighean invaded Ard-Taebh with his army of barbarians and magical monsters. It didn't seem to matter to some folk that mageborn fought just as hard against the Hound of the Blackthorn. Magic was something few men understood anymore. Even Conor had to admit there were so many things about his adopted son that still puzzled and even startled him.

The moon was starting to rise over the forest, and the trickle of water at the stone mouth of Piper's Rift took on a silvery gleam. Conor was about to retire, for it was getting harder to keep his eyes open, when he heard a faint keen. The mercenary paused, laying a hand on the hilt of his sword, rising from his seat on a log by the fire. He peered out at the world draped in sha-



Artwork by Michael Kucharski

dows. Nothing stirred, and yet ... He took a deep breath to revive himself and walked towards the tent. "The wind," he muttered to himself, though the grass and branches were still. "Or a vixen calling her kits."

Strange, but he didn't hear the usual prattle of crickets and night birds over the water. Such unnatural silence was enough to still his hand as he reached for the tent flap. Why was it so silent? He tried to convince himself that there might have been a wolf lurking about in search of game, but his heart was not convinced. With a sigh, he released the tent flap and straightened up to his full height.

The wailing echo that graced his ears sounded miles away. Conor froze and listened. He had not been so many years out of Keltora that he did not know the voice of a pipe now swelling through the dark. Frowning, he glanced towards the mouth of the ravine. The sound seemed to drift from that direction, and before he could think, he found himself moving, determined to find the source.

But instead of entering the ravine, Conor chose to climb the footpath on the ridge up to where the stone monument had been laid. In the shadow of the cromlech, Conor paused. He laid one hand against the ancient stones, using them as a brace as he peered into the rocky ravine.

The song of the piper was stronger now. It rose like a man's mournful wail. Moonlight brightened the world from up here above the forest. Conor stretched towards the rim, eager to see what made such a noise, when his gaze fell on a shadow coming up behind him. With a gasp, Conor fumbled his sword from the scabbard and turned.

Rhoyd shrieked and threw himself behind one of the stones.

"Rhoyd!" Conor snapped, his own heart in his throat. Anger threatened to surface, and he let it, just grateful that his own reflexes had betrayed him in a moment of fear. Normally, he would have struck without a thought .... "That was a foolish thing to do, lad, slipping up on me. I ought to warm your trews!"

"I'm sorry," came the terrified whimper, "but I saw you leave, and I heard the music ...."

Conor took a deep breath, rubbing his free hand over his face. Me and my wretched bogie tales, he thought.

"It's nothing, lad," he insisted. "Just the wind ..."

Rhoyd shook his head in denial, his gaze shifting towards the rim as he slipped out from behind the cromlech stone and moved closer. "Look!" he insisted and stretched a finger towards the ravine.

Conor did. Fog was slipping into the ravine, following the trail towards a huge boulder from which water flowed. There it gathered to form the shape of a marching man. "Horns," Conor muttered, quickly pulling the lad to his side.

The ghostly figure paraded back and forth, his piping song wailing as though coming from beyond some thick veil. As his figure solidified, he appeared to be a handsome, dark-haired man with a beard and long hair braided back. He wore his seven double ells of plaid kilted in the old tradition, bereft of trews. His cheeks were puffed out as though he carried two eggs in his mouth as he bellowed a pibroch at the large stone. By the build of him and the colors of his plaid, Conor had no doubt that this was the legendary Tormod of Clan MacEwen.

Artwork by Michael Kucharski

As Tormod played, a second spurt of fog billowed from behind the stone, and another figure appeared, twiddling away on a set of silver pipes whose bag was co-

vered with fine white fur. This one looked like a pale youth, thin and gangly in the same sinewy fashion as Rhoyd, but obviously older than the mageborn lad. Dressed in a white shirt and doeskin trews, the second piper had pitch-black hair and cerulean eyes, and seemed far more agile of finger and foot than Tormod. And the song the youth played had an air of magic to its keen.

They marched around one another, the older piper looking surly and uncertain, while the youth danced most merrily and sported bright mischief in his brilliant eyes. Conor crouched, slipping one arm around Rhoyd's waist, ready to seize the lad up and flee if necessary, and felt an arm draw across his shoulders.

Hither and yon, the songs went, note for note, reel for reel. It was clear to Conor that the youthful piper had the greater skill and power, but Tormod seemed unwilling to admit defeat. The music surged back and forth like an argument without end. Tormod's face grew red with rage. The youth was capering about as though the exercise was no more than a gentle stroll. Soon, Tormod could do no more than stand in place and play while the young piper danced a circle around the man.

Then moonlight flashed off steel, and Conor felt his mouth drop open in shock. Tormod glowered at the youth, and suddenly changed his tune, attempting a wretched version of the Seelie piper's song. The youth turned, looking aghast, and it was then that the old piper thrust his long dirk into the younger's heart.

Rhoyd gasped and tightened his grasp on Conor's shoulder as blood sprayed the ground. The young piper sank to his knees, looking startled by his own bloody death. Tormod's face went from rage to the mortal pain of realization at what he had just done. With an anguished cry, he ripped the chanter from his own pipes, shattering it across his knee and tossing it down on the ground. Then Tormod tenderly lifted the youth and his pipes, turning towards the rock. Dark eyes suddenly raised, fixing Conor with their unearthly gleam.

"*Tell them the truth,*" Tormod said, his voice as hollow as the wind. "*I took a life in jealous rage. I brought myself to shame, and still, the Old Ones forgave me and let me pipe for them until my dying day ....*"

As one, they slipped onto the boulder and disappeared.

For breathless moments, Conor remained where he was, still as stone. Only when he heard Rhoyd draw a ragged breath did Conor feel the spell of silence break. The mercenary shook himself and rose, hauling the lad with him. Arms went around his neck and, for a moment, Conor held the trembling lad, relishing his warmth.

"Tormod killed the Old One," Rhoyd said in a tiny voice.

"That was an Old One?" Conor said and looked at the lad who drew back.

Rhoyd nodded, and Conor found himself struck with awe. All mageborn were said to be descended from Old Ones. And having seen that other tonight, Conor could have no doubt that some of the tales told about his own adopted son were true ....

"Let's go back to camp," Conor said, setting Rhoyd on his feet and taking his hand. "If Eithne wakes up and finds us gone, we'll both get a tongue-lashing for larking about in the dark like a pair of fools."

The small hand wrapped in his own wove thin twigs of fingers through his to return the comforting clasp. Conor started towards the trail with the young lad close. The mercenary let his thoughts wander aimlessly, pondering what he had seen. All the years, he had been told the Old Ones probably killed Tormod for challenging their piper. Yet after what he had seen tonight, the true twist of the tale left the ending he'd known bitter on his tongue.

"Are you going to change the tale?" Rhoyd asked.

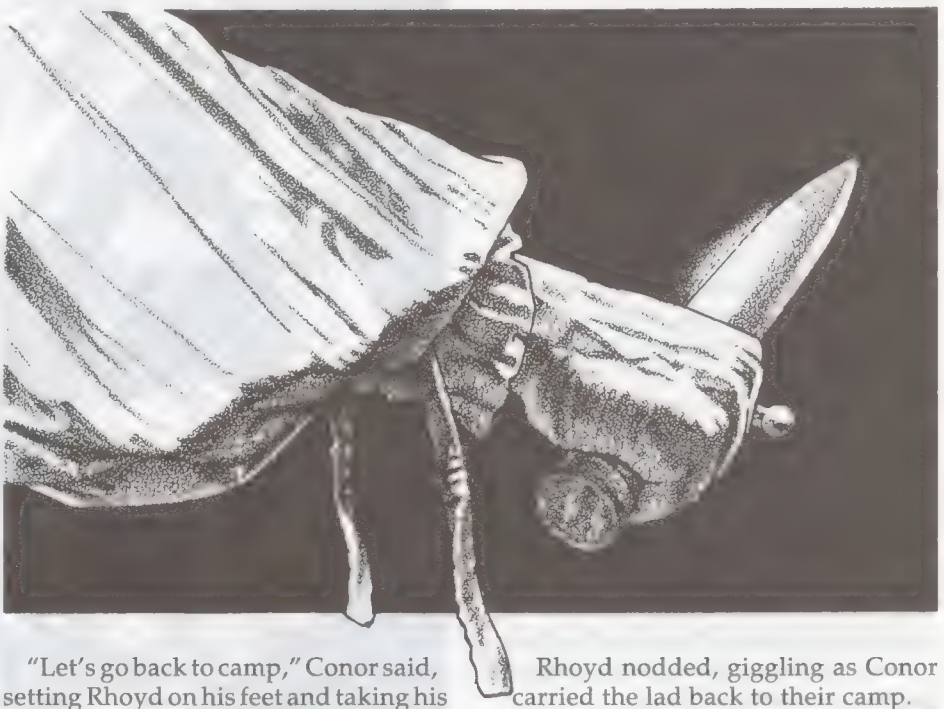
"Hmmm?" Conor responded.

"Will you tell what you saw?" Rhoyd said, looking up with bright blue eyes that seemed to glow under the moonlight. "Will you tell them the truth?"

Conor smiled wistfully for the lad, sheathing his sword and shuffling his free hand through the thick mop of black hair before crouching to offer a ride. Rhoyd eagerly clambered onto Conor's back, looking pleased as the mercenary rose again. "Aye, for it's a truth that needs to be known when men start thinking ill of magic and mageborn."

"Will you tell Eithne?" Rhoyd piped in Conor's ear.

"Another time, perhaps," Conor said. "She's never been fond of my tales, you know."



Artwork by Michael Kucharski

Rhoyd nodded, giggling as Conor carried the lad back to their camp. ❄

Laura J. Underwood has published several short stories in various volumes of **SWORD AND SORCERESS**, *Appalachian Heritage, Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine, Adventures of Sword & Sorcery, Tale Spinner,* and *Of Unicorns and Space Stations,* as well as nonfiction on everything from being a stable bum to swordswomen in fantasy and a plethera of book reviews for the Knoxville News-Sentinel.

Michael Kucharski has worked as a professional illustrator and graphic artist in the advertising and journalism fields for nearly two decades.

LETTERS

Ferrell Snow, Little Rock, AR

I very much enjoyed the interview with Lawrence Watt-Evans in issue #38, especially the discussion of the importance of maintaining a consistent, internal logic within invented fantasy worlds, specifically Howard's Hyborian Age. The coexistence of technologically diverse cultures is not necessarily a contradictory construct and has many historical precedents. 14th century French knights fought mounted in full plate while, at the same time, in the Scottish highlands and Irish backwaters, Gaels entered battle barefoot & nearly naked. This framework roughly corresponds to Howard's Aquilonia and Pictland. Other, more extreme examples from history can be cited, such as Cortez and the Aztecs, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, or even today — some civilizations have attained space flight while remote pockets of Stone Age culture still exist.

It's a shame that Howard's work is routinely dismissed these days. Rarely does one encounter a more fully realized and consistent fantasy world as his Hyborian Age, solidly grounded in historical, mythological and literary allusion. Most of today's fantasy is utterly unconvincing in comparison, its mythic resonance achieved mainly through the use of the word "elven". Yet, at cons, should one commit the *faux pas* of mentioning Conan, the name invariably elicits a snicker and smirk. I believe this can be attributed to the devaluation of Howard's most famous creation over the past couple of decades by movies, books, comics, an appallingly bad TV show, etc., inconsistent with the original character and mythos established by the author. The later works are produced by those who ignore (or are ignorant of) the rich veins of source material mined by REH, people who, as Mr. Watt-Evans pointed out, "should have known better".

(In this case, REH is "Robert E. Howard", not me. — Rachel E. Holmen)

Gawin Blackstone (via e-mail)

I am seeking to send a submission into the magazine, and I was looking through the manuscript preparation when I noticed that a social security number was requested. I was hoping to inquire as to why this is necessary, because I am wary of giving it out.

It is not absolutely necessary until we decide to buy your story, at which point we must have it or we can't pay you. The reason we ask for it on manuscripts is because our writers move frequently and often change their names, and it's the one piece of information that doesn't change — the one that tells us that "Cassandra Silverpen", "Patricia Mathews", and "Patricia Shaw" are all the same person. We do not sell or otherwise release our data base to anyone; and with disposable manuscripts, we run the page with the SS# on it through the shredder before adding it to the recycling bin. We appreciate that people giving us their social security numbers are trusting us with confidential information, and we treat this information with care. — Elisabeth Waters

Jeremy L. Knox

As a new writer and author hopeful, I have spent hours sending out letters looking for writer's guidelines, querying for reads. It seems the bulk of my time is trying to get some "business" and the minority is devoted to my actual writing. To date I have tried to remedy this by using form letters for my requests as much as possible. If they can do it, so can I.

I couldn't do that with this letter. The editors that I have submitted material to so far have been impersonal names, with no faces. I have wanted to send short stories to your magazine but have lacked two necessary items: 1) the writer's guidelines, and 2) the guts. The first is easy to be done with, May I have a copy of your writer's guidelines in the enclosed SASE? The second is harder still.

When I was young, I won't say how young, my parents had a copy of one of your books. I read it, and it was the first science fiction novel I had ever read. Up until that point I had read mostly adventure and western stories. Since then, I have read primarily fantasy, sci-fi, and literature. I would like to thank you for that influence.

Also, I'll have you know I very nearly had to pry a Darkover book from my wife's fingers before I could propose to her. It seems she was so engrossed in the work she didn't hear the question. Please forgive the long-winded letter. As I say, I have never written an editor that I know as an author. Thank you very much, for everything.

Well, at least you knew your intended wife shared your love of books and of sf. — REH

Thornton Kimes, San Francisco, CA

I'm so glad you interviewed Lawrence Watt-Evans. Mr. Evans' *ETHSHAR* books are the ones I've enjoyed the most (plus, not having seen *all* those *thirty* titles, well...), it would be nice to see more written. I'd also like to say:

1) **I hate blowing $20-plus on hardbacks.** Gimme affordable paperbacks. I hope the indy bookstore lawsuit against the big chains succeeds, *****!

2) If I saw a pure sf novel (not one of LWE's earlier ones) with Mr. Watt-Evans' real name on it, be sure I'd give it a chance. I'll bet there are a lot of us out there feeling the same way.

3) Finally, Mr. Watt-Evans and Mr. Schweitzer forget "alternative history", which is getting more popular. Harry Turtledove seems to be the reigning monarch of the subgenre (interview *him*! pleeez!) and I'm going to turn blue waiting for the sequel to the *WORLDWAR* alternate history series. I have babbled about it (the first series) to others in San Francisco's Fantasy, Etc. bookstore to people looking for good stuff to read — people who hadn't heard of Harry Turtledove. Mr. Watt-Evans et al., take note, fans talk about what they read. Even if the chains and the idiot "product-mongering" publishers are on a different page, I'd like to think we can still make ourselves heard. Maybe I'm being over-the-top, or something, but the interview pushed some buttons.

As a matter of fact, we have been considering a Turtledove interview. — REH

More from Thornton Kimes:

Jo Clayton didn't have fame, but she won't be fortotten until (hopefully never!) well into the next century...

Marion and I certainly hope so. She was a sweet person and an inventive writer. — REH

WRITERS TALK BACK:

You're Never Too Old To Start ...

... writing, that is

by Jacqueline M. Shank

My own example illustrates this statement. I taught elementary school for thirty years, and took early retirement at 58.

The next summer a free-lance writer, Nan Phillips, conducted a two-week workshop on writing, sponsored by Tillamook Bay Community College, and featuring interesting and varied writers as guest speakers.

A member of the audience was writing an amusing column about his community for the weekly Tillamook *Headlight Herald*. He suggested I could write one about my town. I thought, "Nah," and then I thought, "Why not?" So I wrote a sample, submitted it to the editor, and was accepted. I drove home that afternoon about three feet above the pavement. They would *pay* me 50¢ an inch! I was a *writer*. I wrote that column for six years, and quit because I got tired of it. But I started at age 59-1/2 and I was on Medicare and collecting Social Security when I stopped.

I took Nan's writing class beginning that Fall, wrote an article about retirement which was accepted by *The Oregonian*, and *they* paid me $25. Wrote a haiku and sent it to *Oregon Coast Magazine*; they accepted it and paid me an extra copy. Wow! What's all this about rejection? What rejection?

I re-told a few fairy tales, and at a writers' conference sold the concept to Jean-Louis Brindamour of Strawberry Hill Press. I wrote a total of 25 stories and a friend, Linda Alexander, illustrated each one. The book, called **HAPPILY EVER AFTER, AND ALL THAT**, was published in the fall of 1997, when I was 70 -1/2, but not counting.

I wrote a children's story, and won Honorable Mention in a writing contest. Way to go! Submitted the story, and its two sequels, to practically every publisher of children's books in the universe, and got my first experience of rejection. By the time I received the last one, I had learned not to take it personally. Nobody wanted my Frog and Turtle stories.

I had decided by then that what I like to write is fantasy, so I wrote a fantasy novel. And learned more about rejection. I wrote another novel, same lesson. But one rejection from an agent said, write short stories and get them published in magazines, then try selling the novel.

I did that, and finally, after a folder full of rejections, had a story accepted by *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*. I signed the contract for that first fiction sale on my 68th birthday. And that story won first place in The Cauldron. Then I sold Mrs. Bradley a second story, and a third, and the third won third place in The Cauldron.

I have had three stories accepted by a magazine called *Of Unicorns and Space Stations*; the first two are published, and the pay was an extra copy of the magazine. It's a little biannual magazine, but growing. And hey, the publisher is going to start paying his writers in June 1998, and he still has one of my stories.

Meantime, I wrote a short children's story about an eight-inch dragon, and won second place in the same writing contest, a few years later. And *they* paid me $75. Woo hoo! I expanded the story into a short novel, and it's been rejected. And three other novels have been rejected.

So why do I keep writing, with all this rejection? Because I love the people in the writing group that developed from the class, when the teacher was no longer able to teach. Because it keeps my brain operating. Because every once in a while someone likes what I do enough to print it. Because I have a pension, and Social Security, and am not depending on writing for a living.

Advice? None, if you want to make a lot of money; I'm not qualified, as you can see from the above. But if you're retired, and have an income, and time on your hands, here are ten ideas which may be useful:

1) Write because you like to, because it's fun, because you have something to say. If you don't *like* doing it, find something else to keep your brain busy.

2) Think about writing your memoirs, especially about when you were young, before the kids were born. You may never be published, but your kids will thank you. Believe me, they will. My mother wanted to be a writer, but she never wrote about herself, and I really wish she had. All the stories she used to tell me about herself went right out of my head when she died.

3) Find, or create, a writing group. It can be quite small, but it should be supportive. Critique groups are fine, if you are terribly serious about being published, and can take a lot of analysis. Me, I like my group. We correct lapses in grammar (four of us are retired teachers) and make suggestions, but mostly we read our stuff to each other, and make nice comments. It's not rigorous, but it's a useful discipline. It is embarrassing to meet with the group week after week with nothing to share.

Which brings me to 4) Don't worry if you're not a disciplined writer. If you don't sit at your desk/typewriter/computer every day, if you don't churn out 1000 words or five pages every day, remember: YOU'RE RETIRED. You don't have to do this unless you want to. If someone wants to have lunch, or play golf, or if you've found a really good book, go for it. Write later. You've got the rest of your life.

5) Take a workshop or two, or a class at the local community college. It can't hurt, and you could learn something.

And remember this: your writing will improve just from doing it. Practice may not make perfect, but it makes better, definitely.

6) Buy, or borrow from the library, some books or magazines on how to write. The world is full of them, from general to genre. They help.

7) "Write about what you know," is advice you will hear frequently. Not bad advice for you, who have lived long enough that you know a lot. But don't let that limit you. Write about whatever you find intriguing, and stretch your imagination.

8) Sometimes you have to do research. That can be fun too. The local library is a great source of information, as is the Internet. So are people; if you tell them you're writing an article/book, they'll share all kinds of knowledge.

9) If you really want to sell your stuff, check out the library for **LITERARY MARKETPLACE** (the LMP), or **WRITER'S MARKET**. Find some copies of the magazines *Writer's Digest*, or *The Writer*. Take lots of workshops, join a statewide or regional writers' organization that holds annual conferences, and monthly meetings, and go to those. They can be fun, and helpful.

10) Remember this, it's the most important thing of all. A WRITER IS SOMEONE WHO WRITES. Next time a friend asks you what you're doing with your time, now that you're retired, tell them casually that you're writing a book/novel/play/poem. They'll want to know what it's about, and you can tell them, "Oh, it's a novel about a family who ..." or "It's a science fiction story set in the year 2098 ..." or "I'm doing research for an article about ..." You'll be delighted at how many socks you will impress off people.

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INTERVIEW

An Interview With Robert Holdstock

by Darrell Schweitzer

MZBFM: To an extent ***MYTHAGO WOOD*** *and its sequels have defined you as a writer in the public mind. Do you find your career being wrapped around that one story-cycle?*

Holdstock: To an extent, that is certainly true. In fact I love writing that cycle of stories, **MYTHAGO WOOD**, **LAVONDYSS**, **THE HOLLOWING**, and, just coming out, **GATE OF IVORY, GATE OF HORN**. Four books. The difficulty is that at the end of each Mythago book, I am quite claustrophobic with the enchanted wood in which I set the stories. It is a very small, enclosed landscape on the outside, and this vast landscape on the inside. But I do like to have a change, and it is at the point where I want to have a change that I get some resistance to the idea of changing, because Mythago Wood is still very popular, I am delighted to say. And the follow-ups haven't done so badly either. The first book did define the cycle, and the others, though very different from Mythago Wood, are nevertheless set in the same realm and carry with them a sense of continuity and identity.

So the short answer to your question is, yes, it is a persistent part of my career and is always an interesting part to publishers and to readers, most specifically to readers, but I am not allowing it to define my career, because I do need to rest a while from that same theme. Which is why I wrote **ANCIENT ECHOES**, which although it very much relates in some ways to the themes I like to explore, the location of magic and the supernatural in our conscious minds, or unconscious minds, it has a very different landscape, a different feel. It's a much darker book. And, before that, **THE FETCH**, an out-and-out dark fantasy called **UNKNOWN REGIONS** in the States, for which mea culpa, because I don't think it's as good a title as **THE FETCH**.

That wasn't as short an answer as I had intended, but it is an answer.

Actually, it seems to me at least that your description of the Wood as being so small on the outside and so vast on the inside is a pretty good description of England, and particularly of an English wood. In America we have endless forests in some places that can go on for hundreds of miles. But in England, if there's a stand of trees, it probably not only has a name but as had a forester since the Middle Ages.

So, do you see Mythago Wood as a product of the English landscape or as a miniature of England's past?

I don't like to think of my Ryhope Wood as a miniature of England. Or Britain, I would prefer to say. It isn't deliberately a book about English/British myths. It's a very European book. The characters and the heroes that can be found in my enchanted wood will be familiar to Germans, Norse, French, Greeks, Transylvanians! They are the stuff of European myth. But I'm English and I wanted to set a story in a remote part of the English landscape, in a small stand of very primordial woodland. Unfortunately that did at the time of publication give the impression that I was, to an extent, a "Little Englander," and I most certainly am not. But I hope I have rectified that with the later books by emphasizing the broader myth-base of the legends that can be found within Ryhope Wood. I don't think it is a reflection of only England. Yes, your comment about England seeming small on the outside and vast in the middle, I sort of take that. I have spent a lot of time walking the hills and the mountains of the island, and driving through the countryside and finding historical and sacred sites. It is a big, big country. I could spend my whole life and not see the whole thing. But my wood feels more like a gateway into the past, rather than anything else. It is small on the outside, but inside you're in the otherworld, the Celtic otherworld or the Greek underworld, or anywhere I choose to take you.

It's also a gateway to the unconscious, so that anything the unconscious can produce could appear in one of the stories. Do you see the series going on indefinitely?

I will refer you back to my previous answer. The unconscious is a big part of my work, the nature of the unconscious

and the way the unconscious feeds our conscious mind with dream images, the images that become myths, the archetypal forms, if you like, that are the basic matter for the legends and myths we're familiar with.

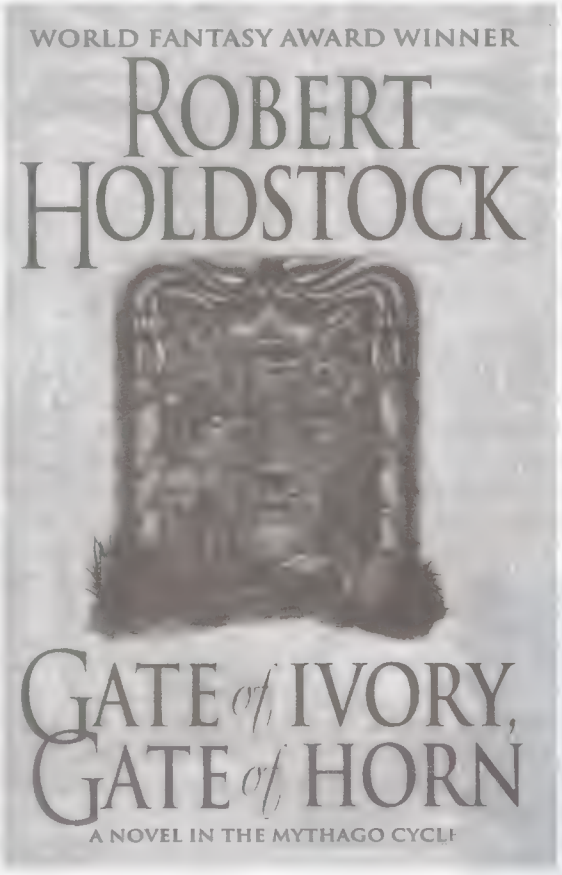
ANCIENT ECHOES is a serious exploration of the relationship between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind through the eyes of a character who enters his own unconscious mind. What I've said in **ANCIENT ECHOES** is that everything that is archetypal and shared in common with all of humanity drifts up, takes different ways, different routes up from the unconscious toward the conscious and meets everything from the conscious that we have learned and experienced on its way down into the unconscious. There is a zone called "the Deep" between the two where the interaction between the two states of mind creates a lot of weird and wonderful landscapes. There are landscapes that could be populated by dinosaurs, because you can read about dinosaurs and create your own image of a dinosaur. And there could be present an archetypal Greek hero. It's a complex book, but it was such fun to do. I think the main fun, the reason for it being fun, is that I actually do believe that there must be an interactive zone between the two parts of the mind where a collective unconscious world meets a very vibrant and very superficial conscious world.

I would like to be judged on what I have done in the book rather than on my answer, which is probably a little rambling. In short, **ANCIENT ECHOES** and **MYTHAGO WOOD** are two sides of a coin. And, yes! I see the series continuing!

Do you prepare yourself with a lot of study of myth-theory, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, and so on? There's another school of thought that if you have to learn an archetype, it isn't one, some one should just follow instinct. What is your approach?

If you have to learn an archetype it isn't one. Yes, the "Quest for the Lost Archetype" is the holy grail of all writers of mythology and fantasy, and of course there can't possibly be one.

I did a lot of reading of Carl Jung and James Frazier (**THE GOLDEN BOUGH**) a long time before I started to write these books. I read them for a different reason, just out of pure interest, and Joseph Campbell I came to in the early '80s, **THE MASKS OF GOD** — four wonderful books, very hard books in a way, but I noticed that when I was reading Campbell in the early '80s I was getting a lot of prods to my imagination — I was clearly clicking into gear. What I then did was put Campbell's books away and let them simmer for a long time. I was already writing **MYTHAGO WOOD**. And **MYTHAGO WOOD** was coming, I think, directly out of my experience of Carl Jung, especially his works on symbolism. **LAVONDYSS** definitely comes out of my appreciation of Campbell.



But, again, the short answer to your question is, no, I don't sit down with research books. I just write what comes into my mind, but what is coming into my mind has been very influenced by the people you've mentioned, and also, I have to say, by Nigel Kneale, a British writer of terrific quality, whose **QUATERMASS AND THE PIT** I know is deeply formative in me. [Laughs.] I don't take the idea, but it was the way in which **QUATERMASS AND THE PIT** combined the occult, mythology, and hard science. I've always done that, and I think it is a very, very interesting juxtaposition.

*You have also written a certain amount of straight science fiction. You certainly began your career as a science-fiction writer. Your first novel, **EYE AMONG THE BLIND**, is a science-fiction novel. Did you envision writing fantasy from the start, or did you come into fantasy through science fiction?*

It's a long time ago now. The first stories I wrote were either science fiction or absolute horror. I always wrote the two types. **EYE AMONG THE BLIND** is a far future, far galaxy — a galaxy far, far away — with an alien life form that is sufficiently recognizable and interactive with human beings that there is a colony on their planet, but evolution is working backwards. So they started off as a highly advanced race and they're becoming increasingly primitive, and the ghosts of the advanced race are haunting the planet.

Now, that is absolute nonsense. But I thought, I wonder if I can get away with telling a story about reverse evolution? — answer: No — although the book is very readable. But ghosts. Even in my first science fiction I have the element of the supernatural. There were no rules. Nothing was governing those ghosts. It was a pure occult presence on the planet. The book worked, when it came out, because it was so different, although it has been long forgotten. Thank you for remembering it. [Laughs.]

I will add that in the second science-fiction book, **EARTHWIND**, that's where I really used my reading of Carl Jung. The original title was **A CLASH OF SYMBOLS**, which would have been an awful, punning title. But it really is about the mandala, and about time, and the collective unconscious; and again set on a planet in a galaxy far, far away. So, again, occult and science fiction. That one needs to be remembered, but unfortunately is now very obscure. But that's just a little plug, in case any friendly publisher is reading this.

Do you find yourself similarly able to deal with mythic material in science fiction? Most of your more recent books focus on the past. How do you deal with myth when focusing on the future?

I wasn't dealing with myth in the early science fiction. It was very much focused of course.

Could you then create a new myth, for the future?

If you're setting a book in the future, you're still informed

by the past, by living myth, by all the mythic elements that create such strong stories in legend, the search for the father and the hero's journey, and all those wonderful Campbellian elements that he dissected out of the Greek myths. They apply to all ages. Isn't James Bond just a cannier version of Hercules? Space Operas versions of **THE ODYSSEY**?

Whether you can create a new myth, I never know how to answer that one. I hope I am creating new spins on myth, which I am sure all writers are doing. But **MYTHAGO WOOD**, for example, isn't a new myth. It's a new mythic landscape, perhaps, but it still contains the essential ingredients of myth.

I think probably the answer is no, because if people say they have created a new myth most likely all they have done is created a really original way of looking at an older one. That's my short answer.

Is this perhaps because myths are not created by individuals, but instead grow out of cultures?

I think that is absolutely right. So possibly new myths will arise out of our increasing dependency on and interaction with highly intelligent but utterly dispassionate information systems. I can't think of any forerunners for that in Greek mythology!

To be slightly heretical: Most of the people I've met who are psychology professionals don't take Carl Jung very seriously, but all the literary people do. So I wonder, does Jung apply to life as well as he does to art?

That's quite a tough question. You ask if Jung has more influence on art, and the answer is yes, absolutely right. He's very influential, possibly because of what he thought and what he observed. He was a very creative thinker, and we are very creative people, hopefully. I know that psychology doesn't take him very seriously, but there is a lot to take seriously in Jung, not necessarily his work on the supernatural. But his work on dreams is absolutely fascinating. His work on the collective unconscious is suggesting something neurologists would say does not exist. But you can't prove that it doesn't exist. I think the jury is out on the collective unconscious. I certainly think that there is something deep within us all that is similar in us all. It's not necessarily that we can communicate with one another through it, but that we dream through it in the same way. Jung is the artist's and particularly the writer's psychologist. No doubt about it. Certainly on just an anecdotal level, just to open a volume and read for a few hours for pleasure almost certainly will set story mechanisms in motion, if not immediately, a few weeks later, and I bet every writer you ask, who reads Jung, will say the same thing; especially Jung's work on the Shadow. It is very, very potent, stimulating, triggering work.

So, did Jung merely observe, or did he create a new myth?

I don't think he created a new myth. I certainly think he observed myths, and rather like Campbell thought about what myths mean in the evolution of culture and the evolution of consciousness and the evolution of the mindsets that characterize different cultures which are unique to the culture and, as Jung would say, share the deeper, familiar, almost identical resonances on what he would call the collective unconscious level.

No, he wasn't a myth-maker, but he was very much a myth-thinker.

A myth-mapper.

Better.

Do you ever write based on your own dreams, or is fantasy for you a completely conscious process?

LAVONDYSS was written from my own dreams. Although the story that I wanted to tell in that novel was plotted and thought through at the time I came to write it (at least, the first half), my approach was to dream the book. A lot of meditation, a lot of thinking, a lot of encouraging my unconscious mind to give me some images, hours spent concentrating on a single image until it started to twist into a life of its own. The scenes toward the end, of the tree, of the forest growing into and through my heroine, came in that way. It was a very disturbing image to arise. I remember at the time feeling utterly out of control, just letting the daymare run its course. There are several parts of that book that most emphatically came from encouraging myself to release some images. It was very hard to do. I didn't use drugs. I used meditation and, as I say, I used very deep thinking. The images were horrific at times, and at other times quite beautiful. There's a sequence in the book called "Old Forbidden Place," a very resonant title for the part, and the name came in a dream, and the images of the masks that it contains came in the same dream. Even part of the language that is spoken in my ancient realm came in the dream, and I spoke them aloud in my sleep.

I have often written about this. I have a partner, Sarah, who will testify that I was talking in a strange language, words that sounded, she said, like "Rajathook" and "Injathook." (You can spell that how you like.) She said, "It was utter gibberish — but you sounded as if you knew what you were talking about." [Laughs.]

So, yes, very often my dreams get into the books, but my books are not based upon any relationship I have with dreams. I am not trying to exorcise my dreams through my books. I am always dreaming. Like every fantasy writer, I am always dreaming out loud and awake. The ones that come in sleep, if they're coherent, are the icing on the cake, I suppose.

I find myself that the ones that come in sleep are not very interesting or artistically useful, and I can do better awake.

If they're coherent, they're great, but they're mostly not.

Most people dream from experience, and their dreams therefore

have modern imagery, which would be more conducive to surrealism. Have you thought of doing a story based on entirely modern imagery?

You mean a book set in the modern day?

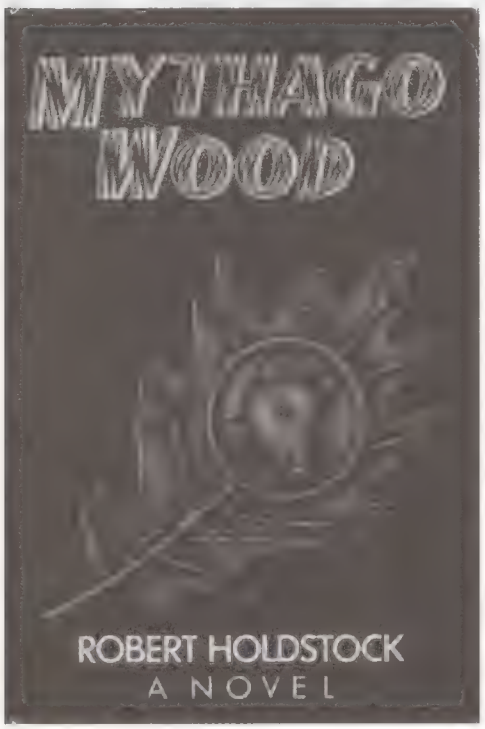
Yes. Set in a world of traffic jams and television rather than in a primordial bronze age, to describe the difference very broadly.

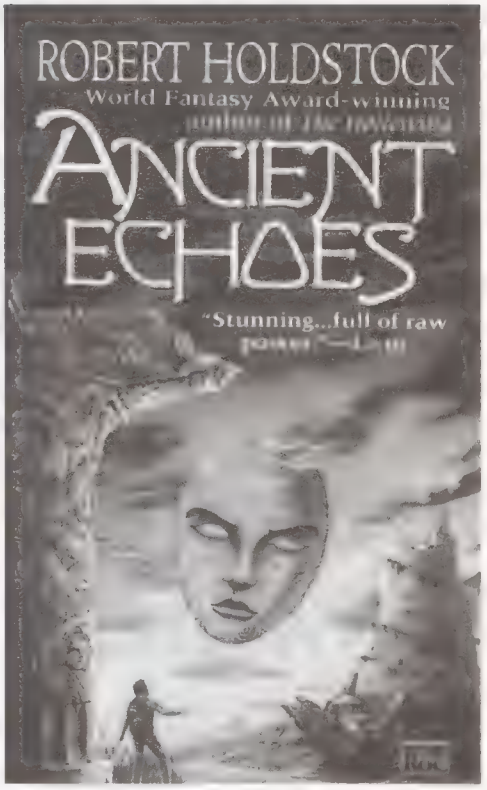
I have thought about it. I haven't done it. The closest, I suppose, would a book called **NECROMANCER**, and more recently **THE FETCH** (**UNKNOWN REGIONS** in the USA) which are set in the modern world. But they are not urban. They are still set in small towns.

It never really appealed, I have to say, although I did think of trying to adapt the Mythago concept to the city. But I haven't done so yet. Quite a lot of people use the urban landscape to play with their Jung and their Campbell, so I think that for the moment I'll stick to my familiar territory.

What is your most recent work, which readers of this interview should rush out and buy?

The latest book is the fourth in the Mythago cycle, **GATE OF IVORY, GATE OF HORN**. It is my homage to the Celtic way of life. It's a spin on some of the Welsh Arthurian myths, not the medieval Arthurian myths. It specifically tells the story of Kylhuk and Olwen, Kylhuk being a lusty young knight at Arthur's court, who has to take a number of seminal and mythical tasks, rather like Hercules in order to satisfy the father of the woman he wishes to marry. I turned that tale round and had great fun with it. Kylhuk is an older man now. He has a legion of Celtic and non-Celtic warriors. They're all mercenaries. They're all legendary figures. The middle section, I hope, has a lot of humor in it, because the Celts were so full of fun. They loved fun, feasting, fighting, frolicking, friendship. Think of all the "f"s you can and they liked doing it. And I celebrate them all in this book. But it is set in Mythago Wood and it is the story of the second brother from Mythago Wood, who turns bad, if you remember. This is the story of why he turns bad. It's a comedy at times and a tragedy in places. Very emotionally engaging, or I am told. The mythic element is much more superficial in this one, though still full of wild guesses at the sources of several Welsh and Celtic myths. It's really talking about the characters themselves. My hero Christian interacts explicitly with some of the very familiar characters that anybody who is a Celtophile, who reads the Celtic stories, will recognize instantly. The story I'm trying to tell is the story of a boy trying to come to terms with his mother's death, and finding that only through contacting a world of myth and legend and understanding how that life works in the form of deception and lies, can he find how his own life has been one of deception and lies. So it's a more human story, it's more of an adventure than the others, but very good to write.





Do you expect to write another Mythago book after this?

I have just been speaking, before this interview, to my excellent agent in America, Howard Morheim, and the words "epic sweep" came up, and we even added "global" to the worlds "epic sweep" to an idea I wish to propose. Well, you have to have, these days it seems. Seriously, it's a very, very exciting idea for me, in that it combines two mythological traditions. But it's not going to be a Mythago book. However, I have to say that everything I write does tend to lean toward the same feelings. There will be no Mythago Wood, but there will be plenty of old friends, if you can read between the lines. When I've done that, I definitely want to return to some of the earlier ideas. It depends on how popular the Mythago cycle remains. There is still a film option open on that first book. But I am conscious that an idea can have its day. So if I'm encouraged by readers to write more, I'll write more. I have plenty of ideas. But, as I said right at the beginning of this interview, it's time for change, just briefly, and so it's, well ... Merlin and somebody else. [Laughs.]

Merlin and Jack the Ripper. That would be commercial ...

That's it! You've got it in one! [Laughs.]

Thanks, Rob.

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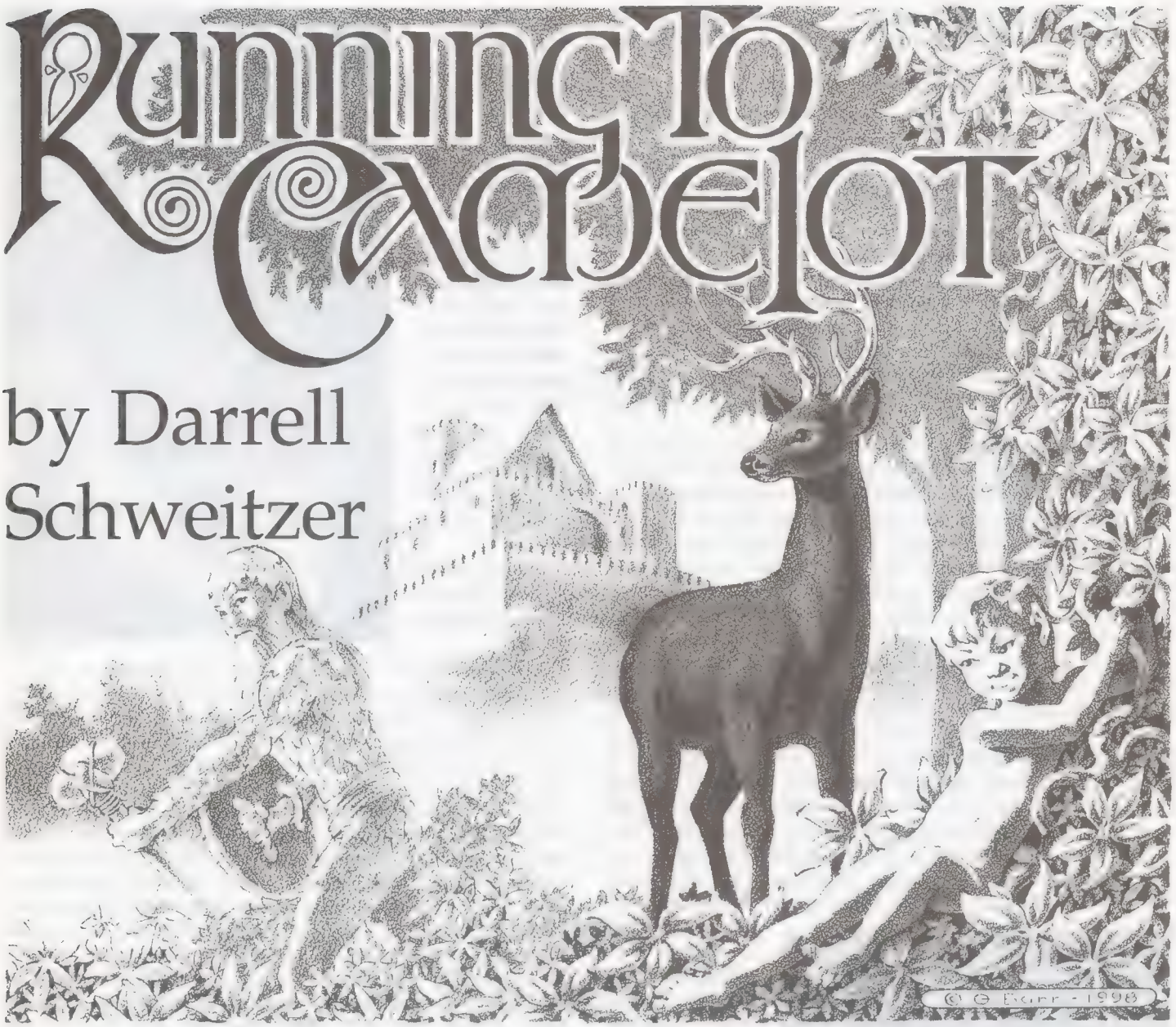
Running to Camelot

by Darrell Schweitzer



The greatest knight in the world? Ha! I knocked him off his horse!

For days without numbering, for I did not know the art of numbers, I had inhabited that darkened, magical wood, amid the mosses and the leaves, touched by the secret wind which sought me out. Far, far within the labyrinth of oak and ash and thorn I began my life, there, not quite alone, not quite in the company of anyone either, in the shadow of a great black castle which seemed to fill half the sky. Truly the Moon passed between its towers. The Sun rose from out of its battlements. Or so it seemed to me.

But I could not enter into that place, nor even touch its walls. When I tried, the black stones shimmered and rippled as if I had thrust my hand into a pool and spoiled the reflection; and the castle would vanish and the forest close over me like a tide, whispering from its infinite depths. I was afraid then, and would gaze longingly at the castle's windows, which alone remained visible, gleaming and hovering like fireflies among the boughs. Sometimes I could hear sounds coming from those windows, shouts, or laughter and music, or screams. But what I longed for most was my mother's voice, as she sang amid her looms and mirrors and magic bowls, as she gazed out into time and wove the image of what was and what was to come.

If I lay very still at night, I could hear her voice on the wind.

But she came to me only in dreams. She stood over me as I slept in the forest, or crouched down and stroked my hair, or whispered sweetly in my ear, calling me her beloved son, her treasure. Sometimes when I awoke there was a gift for me, a blanket or a bright toy.

It was in such a dream that she bade me rise, and led me by the hand to the shore of a lake, where mist rose above still water. She touched the water with her hand and the mist parted, and I beheld, in the water, as if seen from very far away, the image of a splendid man on horseback in brilliant silver armor. Somehow he drew nearer, and I seemed to be hovering just above him. I looked into his eyes and saw valor there, and tenderness, and perhaps a little sadness. I wanted to worship him.

I asked if he were God, but my mother said harshly, "No, he is my enemy. His name is Lancelot."

She wept as she spoke. Her tears darkened the lake to the color of blood, and the image was gone.

I knocked him off his horse! In the dark of the evening, I commanded the leafy branch as if it were my own hand, and *swat!* He tumbled! Crash! Clatter! Oh, my mother would have been so pleased to see her enemy thus, bedazed and bewildered, his armor all splashed with mud, his cloak a hopeless mess; he, the greatest knight in the world, sitting there on his behind looking more than a little ridiculous.

Oh, bravely enough he unsheathed his sword and stood up, tall and broad as he was, but not someone I could mistake for God after all.

"Who will fight with me?" he said.

I showed myself to him first in the form of a black stag; then as a small, naked boy-child who wriggled through the leaves and muck as quick as any lizard; and again as a grown man, clothed in bark and moss and magical armor made of leaves, my beard all a green tangle like a thorn bush, my green shield on my arm and a stone-headed mace in my hand.

"I will fight with you," I said, "for I am a prince of this land."

It wasn't Broceliande, but someplace like that, and my mother wasn't Morgan Le Fay, but another queen, also an enchantress and Arthur's enemy.

Sometimes Queen Morgan came to visit in the form of a bird, or as a white hind, or invisible on the wind and murmuring around my mother's towers until the shutters were flung wide and she was admitted with exclamations of joy and welcome. They were fast friends, those two.

And sometimes, also, she came as herself, as a queen, in glorious state, accompanied by all her court, by her train of wizards and witches and ghosts: exquisite gentlemen and ladies who were hollow behind, like sails filled with wind in the semblance of life.

On those occasions she might even stop and converse with me in the forest on her way to the castle, and pretend to ask directions, or be warned of dangers, though surely she didn't need to.

But mostly I was left outside, alone with the beasts of the wood, and when the shadows suddenly twisted and pale light crept through the forest like heatless fire, the bear or the wolf or the owl would ask me in his own language, "What is this strangeness?" And I would reply, "My mother and Queen Morgan are calling down the Moon."

So we fought, the greatest knight in the world versus the green monster. The stone head of my mace glowed like the rising, green Moon. It cast sparks from his shield like shooting stars.

On my own shield, his sword made a hollow, heavy thud, and gave off no sparks.

So the forest echoed with the sound of our combat, with clangs and thuds, warcries and grunts; and the beasts gathered to marvel at the fury of the fighting. The lights of my mother's castle shone above, like lanterns floating on the air.

My opponent and I wounded each other full sore. His armor was streaked with blood and mine soaked with it, the magic leaves turning orange and red and brown.

He paused, leaning on his shield.

"What are you called, worthy foe?"

I replied in the speech of animals, all snarls and growls. In the frenzy of battle, I wasn't sure I even had a name. Or perhaps my name was a magical secret my mother, in some dream, had commanded me never to reveal.

"Ha!"

Lancelot looked at me oddly.

I struggled toward human speech, like a swimmer struggling up out of the depths, toward the light.

"She ... in the castle ... calls me her child."

Lancelot nodded. "Shall you then be named and remembered as the Child of the Dark Wood?"

"But I am a man."

"Child-who-is-a-man then, Son of the Forest."

"No," I said angrily, grinding my teeth between the words. "I want a good name from you." Somehow that seemed terribly important. I didn't know why.

"Be called Sylvanus. There is no insult in that name, and it could bear honor."

I felt as if I had just received a great gift from him, and, for all he was my mother's dire enemy, I couldn't quite hate him.

That was when I lowered my guard. Quicker than I could follow, he threw his muddy cloak over my stone mace. The light in the stone went out. He struck the mace out of my hand, then flipped the shield off my arm, splintering it into a mass of flying twigs, and I was on the ground beneath his knee. My armor and my strong, man's body melted away, and I was that wriggling, naked child again, pale as a worm, pinned with Lancelot's sword-tip at my throat.

"Mama! Mama! Help me!"

Then a great wonder occurred. The black castle lowered itself out of the sky like a curtain, striking the earth with muted thunder, at which the animals standing about all scattered. The towers and walls rippled, then stood firm and still.

The gate opened, and my mother came forth in all her finery, mounted on a hippogrif. The creature's golden claws scratched the drawbridge nervously. Its clipped wings fluttered.

"Sir Lancelot," she said, "you who are the bravest knight in the world, leave this boy alone and come into my castle, where you are a welcome guest, and there will be feasting."

He let go of me and sheathed his sword. Mother turned slowly on her fluttering mount, and Lancelot climbed up behind. I was left sitting in the mud, completely bewildered. Suddenly ashamed of my nakedness, I drew Lancelot's ruined cloak over me.

I did not speak. I watched them go. Just before she passed out of sight, my mother turned and called back, "You come too, my dearest Sylvanus."

I wanted to protest that I was filthy and had nothing to wear, but she was already inside the castle. The gate rippled, like a reflection in water touched by a breeze. The glowing windows seemed to dance, far above. I got up and scurried across the drawbridge, which was cold and slippery beneath my bare feet. I came, amazed, to a courtyard, all the while expecting the castle to vanish as a shadow does, when sunlight suddenly finds it through rustling leaves. But no, the castle was as firm as any tree that grows in the earth.

A richly clad courtier bowed and bade me follow. He did not seem to care about my appearance. But then he had a raven's head instead of a man's. He twitched it continuously from side to side, looking at me first with one eye, then the other.

I held Lancelot's cloak tightly around myself and shivered, all the while aware that I was leaving muddy footprints all

Artwork by George Barr

over the fine marble floor.

Golden doors swung wide. From within came a blast of light and warmth, and when the dazzlement faded from my eyes, I saw my mother and Sir Lancelot and many lords and ladies at table, feasting.

"Ah, Sylvanus," Mother said, getting up. Everyone stood, raising their cups to me.

I almost turned and fled, but the raven-headed courtier took me firmly by the elbow and steered me to a place which had been prepared for me, at my mother's right hand, below the dais where she sat with Lancelot.

Still I wanted to protest that I didn't belong here with all these fine people, or spirits, or whatever they were, any more than a badger or a squirrel belonged; but no one corrected my manners or laughed at the crudities of my speech, or moved away because I smelled like rotting leaves and mud. Soon even I forgot, as I gazed up on Lancelot by my mother's side, struggling to comprehend how he could be her enemy, or why, if he were, she entertained him thus.

I did not understand what guile was, not in those days.

If Lancelot wasn't God, I decided, then he was *a god*, and my mother must be a goddess, his equal beside him. Like god and goddess they spoke, high above me, and they laughed together, and whispered, and their voices were like the thunder and the wind and the rain chattering through the forest branches.

Then their speech took on a heavier tone, and grew melancholy. There was a moment of utter silence, as if no one's heart beat in all the hall. And Lancelot wept.

(What a profound mystery! The greatest knight in all the world in tears!)

But the melancholy suddenly passed like the shadow of a dark cloud, and my mother the Queen called for jesters and tumblers, and they appeared, and magicians stood up to amuse the multitude with gaudy illusions. In the cleared space in the center of the hall, knights jousted for the pleasure of the company. When one pierced the other with sword or spear, the loser vanished, like candlelight snuffed out.

I looked up, and saw the pale Moon enter the hall through an upper window, high among the rafters, above the glare of the torches. It passed along the ceiling like a fluttering bird and vanished out another window; and so the night passed in feasting and revelry, until at last my mother stood up and clapped her hands.

Then all the company disappeared like a single burst bubble, and we three sat alone in the darkened hall. The faint glow of dawn shone through the eastern windows.

My mother said to Lancelot, "Remain with us here always, and be at your ease, free from pain and strife."

But Lancelot replied, "Lady, you know that I must continue on my journey to Camelot to serve King Arthur. That is my destiny."

Angrily, she said, "Then have a good look at it."

And a tide of shouts flooded through the castle. I saw many forms struggling in the shadows all around. The Moon passed again through the window high above, and by moonlight I seemed to look out over a battlefield from some high vantage point, to where a king's standard was in peril at the crest of a hill.

"Lady," said Lancelot, "now I must take my leave of you."

Without a further word he stepped down from the dais where my mother remained and drew his gleaming sword. He waded into the battle, cutting down foemen as a reaper cuts wheat, until he was atop that hill defending the standard, and Arthur, King of the Britons, fought at his side. The two of them were victorious, and the enemy melted away like bloody dew, while I watched, wide-eyed at the wonder of such feats, my heart leaping in admiration of Lancelot, who stood beside the King in the morning light, tarnished and bloody but transfigured on the battlefield of Mons Badonicus, where all Britain was saved for Christ.

Then the vision passed away, and Lancelot stood in the middle of the

room before the dais, weary and leaning on his shield, covered with blood and wounds.

"Lady, I cannot linger. I must serve my king."

He swayed and seemed about to fall. I ran from my place to hold him up. The cloak fell from my shoulders, and I stood beside him, naked and not at all ashamed, steadying the greatest knight in the world so he would not fall.

"At least let me tend to your wounds," my mother said.

"The pain of them is more sweet than wine," said Lancelot, "for I got them honorably."

"So you did, but you won't do Arthur any good if you bleed to death."

As she spoke, sunlight penetrated the walls of the castle, and stone faded away like mist, and Mother, Lancelot, and I were in the forest, surrounded by birds and beasts, whose names I knew. I called to them, commanding each to fetch rare and healing herbs, while Mother cupped water in her own hands for Lancelot to drink.

Thus we tended him. After a while he slept, muttering of kings and glory.

I looked down at him, then up at Mother.

"But I thought he was your enemy."

"He is," she said. "I shall break his spirit."

"It doesn't seem broken at all."

"Learn patience, Sylvanus."

Here was an odd thing. When *she* spoke my name, it was not a great gift as it had been from Lancelot, though her speaking of it seemed to confirm that now I had a name by which I could go in the company of men. No, when she spoke it, it was just another word, made by breath and tongue.

I gazed down on Lancelot and wondered how I was going to manage to hate him.

Though time in our forest did not pass as does time in the rest of the world, it seemed that a year went by. The seasons came and went, and Lancelot grew strong again. He took long walks with me, sometimes in brooding silence; but sometimes he instructed me in the ways of knighthood. I grew taller and, at first, wore clothing made of leaves. At the end of the year Lancelot gave me extra hose and a shirt and boots from out of his gear, and told me to try to make myself presentable.

Then there came an evening like that one on which we first met, and Mother's castle rippled down from the sky, and once more she bade us come to a feast more magnificent than words can truly describe.

I sat below, while Lancelot and my mother the enchantress conversed upon the dais.

And again, as dawn glowed in the eastern windows, she clapped her hands, and the whole company vanished but for us three.

Her voice echoed in the empty hall.

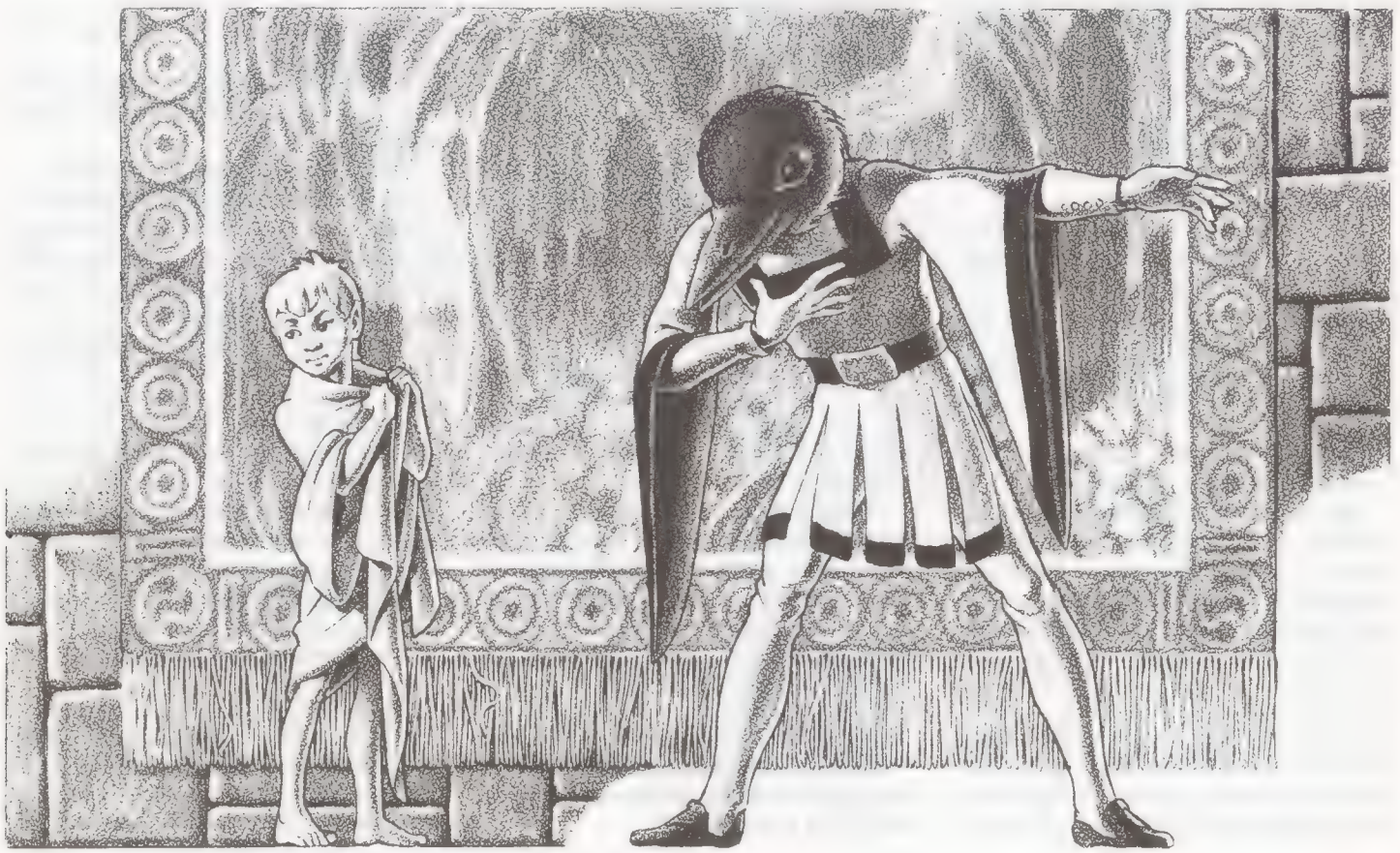
"Lancelot, I am weary. Come and lie with me."

But Lancelot stood and bowed courteously and said, "Lady, I will not. At the court of King Arthur, I am sure I will serve some other lady. I must reserve my faith for her."

In a grim, deliberate voice, my mother said to him, "Then take a look at her, and see if you can boast about your faithfulness."

The vision came, and through it I followed Lancelot on many adventures, in the course of which he was not always true or faithful at all. There was Elaine of Astolat, who died for love of him. Others wept and tore their hair or went mad as he rode away from them. But Lancelot merely continued on his way, outwardly the finest knight in the world, inwardly his soul filling up with sin like a flask filling with dark and bitter wine.

One of these ladies he trysted with



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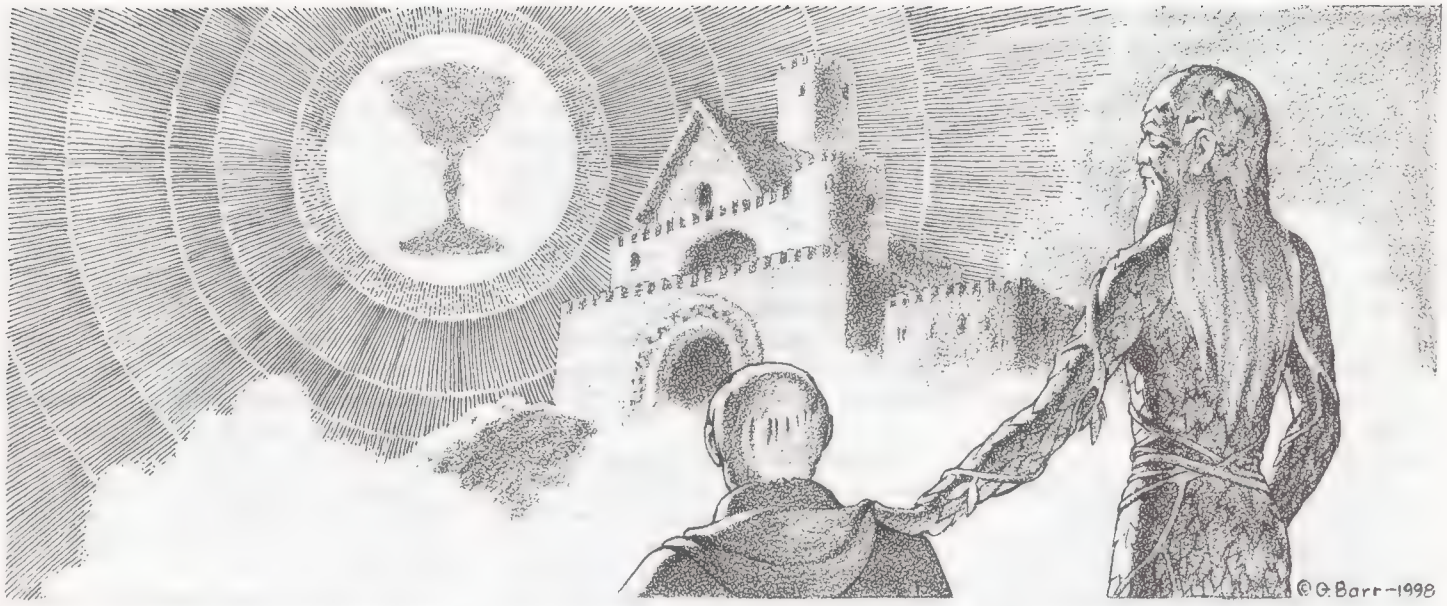

Artwork by George Barr

was my mother, though she was younger in the vision, only a girl. Whether this all happened as part of one of Morgan Le Fay's schemes, or my mother called out to Queen Morgan in her despair when she lay with child and abandoned, I could not tell, nor could I remark on it; for at once, like water stirred by an oar, the vision swirled and shifted.

And I beheld Guinevere, the most beautiful lady in the world, as far beyond my own desires as the stars, but worthy to stand beside Lancelot or share his bed, but for the small problem — and in the glory of the vision it seemed a trifle — that she was already, ahem, Arthur's queen and wife to that same king to whom Lancelot had sworn his honor and his life.

Yet I saw Lancelot and Guinevere coming together many times. They despoiled Arthur's bed.

Beside me in the room, not in the vision at all, Lancelot wept loudly.

"Must this be so?" said my mother the enchantress. "But lie with me, and it need not."

"It must be so," said Lancelot, wounded full sore in his heart.

And I saw how it was to end. King Arthur discovered he had been betrayed. Queen Guinevere was condemned to be burnt, but Lancelot rescued her, slaying many knights in his war-frenzy, even those who had been his friends. Because of this, Camelot was destroyed, Arthur slain, and the Saxons came again, still smarting from their defeat at Mons Badonicus, but this time flowing over the land like an inexorable tide, until the very name of Christ was forgotten in Britain.

Beside me, Lancelot howled and beat his breast. He fell to all fours like a beast and tore off his clothing. It was he who wriggled naked in the mud and through the underbrush as the castle faded away in the morning mist. I ran after him, clumsy in the boots which had been his gift, and I only caught up with him after a very long time; and then I was the one who wept, as I saw him grazing among the wild cattle, his face filled with madness.

He shied away as if in pain when I tried to touch him. Only after much coaxing could I get a woven-grass bridle over his head. Then I led him away from the company of cattle.

Again a year passed in the forest, and I grew to be a man, tall and strong, and still clad like a man. It was my task to bring Lancelot back to his humanity, to teach him to walk upright again, to make himself clean, to wear clothes, and to regain human speech.

I suppose my mother looked on all this while, glad at her handiwork, but she never tried to stop me as I undid what she had done. Maybe that too was part of her plan.

Toward the end of the year, amid the first snows, Lancelot's reason came back to him, as we two huddled around a fire inside a shelter I'd made of mud and sticks. He spoke of his sins, which were many and grievous. Then he cocked his head strangely, as a bird would, and for an instant I despaired, thinking him mad again; and he said, "Is it not passing strange that the greatest knight in the world should also be a wretched sinner?"

Thinking only to comfort him, I said, "But he is still the greatest knight in the world."

He sighed and said, "Yes, there is that. He is still the sinner, likewise. The two natures are inextricably conjoined."

I didn't know what to say. He sat silently for a long time, while the fire burned down and night birds gathered in branches above us, speaking in their secret speech, which not even I understood.

Suddenly I said to Lancelot, "Are you my father?"

He jerked back, as if I had struck him, but then nodded. "I met your mother once, years ago."

"Do I count as one of your sins?"

He put his hand on my shoulder. There were tears in his eyes, but his purpose was firm. He was a man who wept for sorrow unashamedly, but embraced pain, unafraid.

"Sylvanus, you are half of magic and half of the earth, which is why you must dwell in the forest, not in the enchanted castle, though you, like myself, may visit there under the influence of your mother's spells. You, like myself, are halfway between the beasts and the angels, which makes us no different from all other men."

Then the night birds spoke to me and said that the Queen of this forest, who was my mother, commanded our presence in her hall.

We rose to go. The dark birds swirled around us like a cloud. Great stags looked up from their moonlit grazing and followed us, as did bears and wolves. Eagles circled overhead, shut-

ting out the stars with their wings. Each creature cried out in his own language that the time was done, the hour was at hand, and the truth would be known.

Together, in this fantastic company, we entered into the feasting-hall, but there were no lords and ladies, and there was no merriment. Lancelot and I knelt beside my mother the enchantress as she lay atop her dais, her powers fading, her face pale and drawn. Her breath came in painful gasps as she struggled to speak.

"Lancelot, I hate you with all my heart, for you are my bitterest enemy; but so too do I love you with all my heart as the lover I cannot attain. Therefore I am torn. My heart bleeds, and I am dying. But stay with me and I shall be well. Forget your destiny. Forget Arthur and Camelot. Stay."

This time Lancelot did not weep. He shook his head gravely.

"No, Lady, it cannot be so."

And he was the one who stood up and clapped his hands.

The vision came.

And I turned and beheld the knights feasting at Camelot when the Holy Grail passed through the hall, and each man was suddenly satisfied with the meat he desired most; and all of them swore the quest of the Grail, Lancelot with all the others. And King Arthur wept, for he knew that these were sinful men, even Lancelot, and that he would never see them all assembled here again, for many would perish in the questing.

But I saw too that Lancelot and a very few others came close to the Grail. They entered the chapel where it was, but could not pass out of the darkness into the next room to actually behold it. That was given only to Galahad, who was without sin, and therefore perfect. He alone achieved the Grail and was subsumed into Heaven, leaving Lancelot and the other knights behind on Earth in the darkness.

But Galahad was the fruit of Lancelot's loins; without Lancelot's siring him, this holiness would never have been accomplished.

Then the vision passed, and Lancelot and I stood beneath the bare trees of the great forest, with my mother dead at our feet.

I looked up once and saw Queen Morgan looking on. I found the expression on her face utterly indecipherable.

I knew that I would spend the rest of my life trying to understand.

She must have vanished sometime while Lancelot and I were digging the grave. We labored throughout the day. When we were done, and my mother the Queen lay in it, Lancelot knelt down and wept once more.

"When this story is told," he said, "and I know you will do some of the telling, let her be called the Sorrowful Lady, for she was wronged by me; and call this place the Forest of Testing. Here have I been tested and tempered, like a sword at a forge."

"Yes," I said.

His horse wandered to his side. It had been kept safe all this while by my mother's magic. He mounted and made to depart.

"Why do you have to go?" I pleaded with him. I wanted to be at his side always. Indeed, to be with him seemed as dear as life itself; it seemed the same thing. "Wouldn't King Arthur be better off without you?"

He shook his head and drew rein. "Without me, Arthur would perish at Badon Hill."

He pulled away and started his horse at a trot. I ran after him, my long legs keeping pace.

"But — but —"

"The quest, Sylvanus, may be hard. It may be filled with sorrow. But it defines who we are. Without it, we are nothing."

"Stop! You and that queen ... it'll be horrible! You're going to kill all your friends!"

He made his horse go faster.

"Think of the Grail, Sylvanus! The holiness! We almost made it!"

He spurred to a gallop and was gone.

I ran after him, for years. Time in the forest did not move the same as it did in the rest of the world, as I have said, and somehow that enchantment lingered over me like a curse, because I never caught up with Lancelot in all those years, even after my beard was more gray than green and my stride ceased to be as long or as certain. Yet I did not turn from my quest, because, as Lancelot had said, it defined who I was. I fought, betimes, but never became anyone's champion, or even a knight. I was the one who came where Lancelot had just been and heard tales of him, or told more of those tales to earn my supper. I was the one who beheld him across a battlefield where he defended the King's standard and did deeds of great worship; and, again, it was I who came into Camelot as a ragged beggar and sat among the poor folk at the far edge of the hall at Pentecost when the Grail appeared before the Round Table and all the knights assembled swore themselves to impossible holiness.

I saw Lancelot then, but I did not speak to him.

And I saw the field of Camlann, where Arthur and Mordred were slain. Lancelot arrived too late, and he bitterly wept.

They say that even as Lancelot wept there, Arthur was borne away in a magic boat to Avalon by three queens, to be buried or to be resurrected; but I did not witness that part of the story and cannot attest.

I can tell that at the very end of his days, when I too was slowed with age, I came to that monastery where Lancelot had retired in his sorrow, casting off all the accouterments of knighthood to repent his sins.

I entered his cell. He looked up from his prayers and recognized me, saying, "Are you one more apparition, sent to torment me?"

I put my hand on his shoulder. "No, I am merely here."

"Why?"

"Because I need to understand what I have seen."

He shook his head vigorously. "No, no. If you understand that, then you know who you are. Nobody knows who they are."

I was afraid, for an instant, that he was still mad, but the look in his eyes was one of peace.

"You went through it all, knowing from the beginning how it would turn out. Was this merely God's irresistible will?"

"No," said Lancelot. "It was mine." He crossed himself and muttered a prayer, knowing he had just committed a sin of pride. "I think I did more good than evil, all told, don't you?"

"All told."

"Better for Camelot to have fallen than never to have risen at all."

"Perhaps."

"And the Grail."

"Yes."

He seized my hand and held it so tightly I thought the bones would break.

"Ah, Sylvanus! Wasn't it *glorious?*"

❄

Darrell Schweitzer was recently married and lives in Philadelphia.

Artist **George Barr** is a Hugo winner.

Glorsal

by Patricia Russo

The tallow dip was just a short length of twisted reeds lightly coated with grease; it burned very fast. Quickly, Ellen unswaddled the baby. Tormaid was crying in a way she'd never heard before, a high pitched, incessant whimper. He didn't want to nurse; he didn't feel warm; he wasn't wet or soiled. "Hush, hush," she murmured, but Tormaid, his eyes screwed shut and his mouth slackly agape, cried on.

Malcolm hadn't wanted to light the dip at all. She'd known he was a fearful man when she married him, but she never thought she'd have to physically push him out of the bed to get him moving, when their bairn was crying so.

"'Tis May Eve, Ellen!" he hissed.

"Nae, tomorrow's May Eve, you great gowk!"

Malcolm held the dip as she ran her hand over Tormaid's body, feeling for insect bites, for a rash, for anything she could name, and thus know how to ease.

"Perhaps he's teething," Malcolm offered.

"He's but a month old, Malcolm," she said, impatiently. The dip had already burned down to within a couple of inches of Malcolm's fingers; she'd face a fight getting him to light another this time of night, May Eve or no May Eve.

She couldn't find anything wrong. No pins sticking in him, no bruises, no swellings. She tried to put Tormaid to her breast again, but he refused the nipple. There was no reason for him to be crying. But he wouldn't stop.

Malcolm tossed the dying end of the dip into the hearth, where it glowed redly for a few seconds and then went out. The cottage had a single window cut into the east wall, but at night it was shuttered and barred with iron. The one door was also shut with an iron bar. An old iron plough blade lay under their bed; horseshoe nails had been hammered into the head and foot of the baby's cradle. The floor had been swept and the sweepings burnt, not tossed out the door; the washwater had been poured out in the back garden, long before sunset. They'd done nothing wrong, nothing to attract Their attention, but when Malcolm said, in a low, frightened voice, "It's Them," Ellen was not surprised.

"It's not," she said. Picking up the baby, she set him against her shoulder and patted him gently on the back. He kept crying.

"Did you leave him alone today? Even for a moment?"

"Stop it," she said. "It's not *that*."

She hadn't left him alone, not for a single instant the entire day. Not for a single instant since he'd been born. An elf-road ran east-to-west not a bone's throw from the end of the back garden. But Ellen knew all there was to know about the Folk; she hadn't been afraid

Artwork by Allison Hershey

to move into Malcolm's unchancy house. Show no lights after dark, for light drew Them to you like moths; never leave the house, day or night, without a piece of iron or a handful of oatmeal in your pocket; never throw anything out the window or the door without a word of warning first, in case one of Them was near; never speak of Them aloud, except very briefly, and even then never use Their true name. She knew to turn her clothes inside out if she were ever pixie-led on the road, and she knew never to answer a knock at the door until it was repeated three times. And she never left Tormaid alone, in case he caught the eye of one of Them, who might then try to steal him away and leave a stock of wood or one of Their own helpless old in the cradle in his place.

"Sometimes bairns just cry, Malcolm," she said.

Suddenly he said, "Prick it with a pin and see if it bleeds."

"Oh, aye, Malcolm, in the dark," she shot back. Standing up, she began rocking Tormaid, too hard. The baby hiccupped, then wailed louder. "Besides, it's not that," she said, over his cries.

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Malcolm was silent, but Ellen could almost see him fretting and frightening himself in the dark. She felt her own head swim. Though it was a cool night, she was all a-sweat.

"Will you take him for a moment?" she asked.

Malcolm quickly shuffled across the small room. He bumped his elbow against her side. If Tormaid's wails weren't boring a jagged hole through her skull, Ellen would have laughed. Malcolm had grown up in this cottage; she'd lived there for a little over a year, and yet she could find her way around it in the dark better than he could.

"I've got him," Malcolm said, breathily. "Here, come to your da, boy."

"No pricking, mind." Ellen did let out a short laugh, then. "He's just crying, Malcolm."

"He's just crying," he repeated, sitting on the edge of the bed. And in his father's arms Tormaid did quiet himself a bit, easing from wails down to whimpers again. "Shh, lamb, shh." Tormaid hushed for a moment, whimpered again, fell silent, then whimpered once more, but more softly.

"Ach, I see the way of it now. He minds his da."

"And why should he not?"

Rubbing her bare arms, Ellen took a couple of steps away from the bed. Her heart was pounding and her face felt flushed. She'd been terribly afraid something bad was amiss with Tormaid, but she wouldn't let herself feel the depth of her fear until the baby started quieting down.

"It's hot in here," she said.

"It isn't. Ah, now, ah now. I think he's falling asleep."

"It is hot in here, Malcolm. I need a breath of air," she said, moving toward the door.

"No!"

Tormaid, startled, wailed piercingly.

"See what you've done!" Malcolm hissed.

"You shouted, not me. I must have a gulp of air, or I'll swoon."

If he'd put the baby down, he might have caught her and pulled her away from the door before she got the heavy bar off its brackets, but Malcolm jumped up with Tormaid in his arms. By the time he felt his way back to the bed and laid the baby down, Ellen had hoisted off the bar. She opened the door and stepped out.

"Ellen, no!"

It was bright without, the full moon in the clear sky shining like a great polished silver plate. Ellen had to slit her eyes against the dazzle. She drew in the cool, damp air, and came over all gooseflesh in an instant. She was a fool; it was cold out here, not cool. Cold and wet. As Malcolm grabbed her shoulder, she was already turning to go back in.

As she turned, her bare foot grazed an object just outside the door, and she looked down. Malcolm took his hand off her shoulder as if snatching it back from a flame.

Artwork by Allison Hershey

She'd hit her foot against the side of a wooden bowl. One of her own bowls that she'd brought to the cottage after the wedding. She didn't own so much that she couldn't recognize every scrap and stick, even in the confusing silvery light of the moon.

The bowl was half full of milk.

"Come inside," Malcolm said, softly.

Ellen stood frozen. "I will not have this."

Her husband was afraid of the Folk. She was not. She hated Them, and Malcolm knew this very well.

"Leave it, Ellen, please. 'Tis May Eve."

"'Tis *not*." The milk was like a little pool of light in the dark bowl. It almost glowed. "And if were May Eve a hundred times over, I will not have this."

"It does no harm."

"It harms *me*. I won't feed those ... *things*. I'll give Them nothing of mine, not so much as a pinch of meal or a drop of water. *Nothing*." Crouching, she reached for the bowl.

"Please. Leave it, just this one time."

"No," she said, fiercely, and tipped the bowl over. Malcolm sucked in his breath as the milk splashed out onto the ground.

Ellen rose and went into the cottage, taking the bowl with her. Silently, Malcolm shut the door, and barred it.

Tormaid was still crying.

In the dark, Ellen swaddled him and set him back in the cradle. Malcolm stretched out on the bed, letting out a barely audible sigh.

"I'm sorry," Ellen said. "But I canna bear it."

Tormaid cried and cried. Ellen fell asleep with his whimpers ringing in her ears. When she woke before dawn, he was crying still.

On May Eve (before he left for the fields, Malcolm said, "You won't deny that 'tis May Eve today?" "No," she said, "'tis May Eve all day until tomorrow, when it'll be May Day"), Ellen was cooking the midday meal when she heard a soft rap on the door.

Not Malcolm, though she was expecting him soon, because Malcolm wouldn't knock. Though Tormaid had nursed twice, he was still crying off and on, and the rap came so softly Ellen wasn't sure if what she heard was the first or second knock. Putting the stirring spoon down on the table, she went to the window and peered out. She couldn't see the front of the cottage from there, but a neighbor would go and stand where he or she could be identified. Ellen saw no one.

It could be a traveler, a peddler, a beggar, a man looking for work. Ellen waited. Even a foreigner would know to knock more than once. Tormaid, though he'd been more quiet than not the whole morning, now perversely began to cry loudly. Sighing, Ellen moved toward the door. As she neared it, she heard a second knock. Or perhaps it was the third.

Ellen waited. And waited. And began to feel embarrassed. Smoke was rising from the chimney, and the baby was wailing. Whoever was outside knew for certain someone was at home. There probably had been three knocks; she just hadn't heard the first. It was bad luck to ignore a beggar, and bad policy to slight a neighbor come for a loan of meal or salt or a glowing coal to restart a fire which had gone out.

Ellen waited a little longer, and then couldn't stand it any more. She opened the door.

Standing on the dirt path, a couple of feet from the door, was a girl dressed in rags so old and worn they'd lost all color. She had long black hair, a sharp nose and a sharper chin, and laughing blue eyes. When she saw Ellen in the doorway, she raised her arms and spun around, twirling on her bare, dusty toes, and threw her head back as if bathing in the bright midday sunlight. She was laughing, a cascading sound

Artwork by Allison Hershey

like bits of glazed pottery tumbling on a silver tray. "Hello, hello, hello," she said. "Hello."

Ellen felt a clutch at her heart. Madwomen should be old. This was a woman younger than she was, a girl who looked barely twenty, if that.

Hiding her dismay, Ellen replied kindly. "Hello. What can I give you, lass?"

The girl stopped twirling and faced Ellen, still laughing. Her eyes sparkled like chips of cut glass. "Your bairn's crying."

"Yes," Ellen said, shortly.

"I heard him from far away. Far, far, far away." The girl laughed gleefully, and hugged herself.

"What do you want?"

"I don't know," she said, abruptly serious. For an instant her face was utterly blank, empty of all expression. "I've come to find out." Tilting her head, she murmured, "There is a hag in the corner, and in her are two hundred eyes."

Ellen puffed out a breath that was almost a laugh, and relaxed. "Ah, I know that riddle," she said. "And you're right, there is a pot of porridge boiling on the fire. You're welcome to a bowl."

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

"No," Ellen said, smiling. "Who are you?"

"Do you know who you are?"

"I think I do."

"Ah, you don't, you don't, you don't. I'm my mother's daughter, aye?"

"Aye," Ellen agreed.

"And you are my mother's granddaughter."

"What?" Ellen said, blankly, but already her heart was pounding.

The girl glided toward her, made a half-twirl, and darted through the door and into the cottage before Ellen could even turn around.

"Wait!" Ellen cried, running after her. She's mad, Ellen thought, she's just a mad girl, a beggar ... but when the lass had brushed past her Ellen had caught a scent of deep summer grass and wildflowers.

The girl was inhumanly quick; she had Tormaid in her arms before Ellen crossed the threshold. The baby's neck stiffened when he found himself held by a stranger; he opened his mouth wide and yelled piercingly.

"Put him down!"

"They don't cry over there," the girl said. "Not even the changelings. They learn not to." She rocked Tormaid, gently. "But I heard this one, even through the music."

"Put him down!"

"Why? See, he's hushing." And he was. Slowly, Tormaid relaxed. He fixed a goggling, round-eyed gaze on the girl's face, and smacked his lips soundlessly.

The girl said, "Sometimes bairns just cry."

"Who are you?" Ellen hissed.

"I am this one's grandmother."

"What's your name?" Ellen asked, tightly.

The girl thought for a moment, then smiled brilliantly. "Giorsal MacDonald."

It was like being stabbed. Ellen pressed a hand over her heart. She nearly cried aloud from the pain. "You're a lying *cailleach sith*."

"Am not," the girl said, grinning.

Ellen felt herself go light-headed. Pulling out the stool from behind the door, she sat on it, heavily. "Are you back, then? Have they let you go?"

The girl frowned slightly. "They have not let me go. But perhaps I am back."

"How old are you?" Ellen asked, because she couldn't keep from asking it.

The girl' s frown deepened. "I don't know. How old was I when I was taken?"

"Just twenty," Ellen whispered. "I was but two."

"And how long has it been?"

"Twenty-one years," Ellen answered, and jerked her chin up. "Twenty-one is three sevens. Does that mean anything?"

"I don't know. Does it?" Giorsal smiled. "So I'm twenty, then."

"No," Ellen said, fiercely.

"Am I not?"

"You canna be, for I am twenty-three."

"I canna be," Giorsal repeated, then flashed a grin. "And yet I am."

Ellen sat on the stool, watching Giorsal rock the now-quiet baby. Her mouth was so dry she could barely swallow, and her stomach felt like a lump of cold lead. She wanted to cry, but somehow couldn't find any tears. Her eyes were as dry as the wiped spoon on the table.

After a moment, Ellen got up and stirred the porridge. Malcolm would be home soon. The thought of Malcolm reminded Ellen of her own father. Turning to Giorsal, she said, "Ach, you don't know, I suppose, that Da died last year?"

Giorsal went rigid, her face freezing to a dead, expressionless mask, except for her eyes, which blazed with hate. "Good. If he was alive still, I'd put a knife in his back."

Startled and frightened, Ellen flinched back. "What?"

"He could have got me back, but he was too afraid. I waited for him, but he never came."

Ellen felt as if she'd been swept up by a whirlwind and spun in a circle a dozen times. She was dizzy, and close to being sick to her stomach. "You could've been brought back?"

"Aye, before I'd tasted of Their food or drunk of Their drink. But he was always afraid of the Folk, was your da."

"I'm not," Ellen said. "I hate them."

Giorsal's mouth turned down. "Then you hate me, too, for I'm more than half Faer myself now."

Ellen moved toward her, slowly. The girl was so fast; if she darted out the door, she'd never catch her. "Have you come for him? Is that it? You'll not take my son, Giorsal MacDonald, that I swear."

But the girl was shaking her head. She smiled, gaily. "No, no. I heard him crying. The sound of it cut through the music like a blade. And I thought: I know that cry. It is like the cry of my own bairn."

"Is it?" Ellen whispered. She looked at Tormaid, drowsy and limp in Giorsal's arms, his eyes half-closed, a bubble of spit on his lips. She'd told Malcolm the baby looked like him, pointing out his already large ears and curly auburn hair. Now she saw how very much Tormaid resembled Giorsal. He had the same pointy chin and upturned nose, the same sky-blue eyes.

"My man will be in from the fields soon," she said.

"Is he a good man?"

"Yes, but a fearful one."

Thoughtfully, Giorsal said, "The way is open all day. I could go back — any time before midnight. But now I'm thinking I want to stay."

Ellen's heart fluttered. "Then stay," she said in a rush. "Stay, mother, stay. But why didn't you come back before?"

"Before?" Giorsal tilted her head. "The music was so loud. And so beautiful. Once you start listening to it, it's hard to stop. Your porridge is boiling over."

Swearing, Ellen snatched up a rag and lifted the pot off the fire, setting it on the hearth-hob to cool. Some porridge had spilled down the side of the black iron pot; Ellen wiped it off with the rag. When she turned around, Giorsal was sitting on the edge of the bed, holding Tormaid to her breast. Nursing him.

She smiled at Ellen sunnily.

It nearly killed Malcolm. He came in eagerly, a-sweat but grinning, happy to be with Ellen and Tormaid again after a morning apart. Ellen opened her mouth, but no words came. She held out a hand, silently.

Malcolm's eyes flicked from her to the girl on the bed. Ellen saw his expression change from simple surprise — oh, a visitor — to bewilderment, then to fear.

He looked at Ellen, his eyes asking for reassurance.

"Malcolm," she said. It was a croak. She cleared her throat. "Malcolm ..."

He stood still, as if turned to stone. "Your sister?" he whispered, though he knew she had none.

"Nae. My Mam, come back."

Malcolm flushed a dark red, then in the space of a breath went dead-white. His chest heaved. Pressing a hand to his breastbone, he turned and stumbled out the door.

Ellen ran after him.

Humming softly, Giorsal nursed the baby. His eyes wide open, Tormaid sucked, round checks filling and hollowing.

Ellen found Malcolm in a heap on the ground outside the cottage, lying as if he'd suddenly crumpled in midstride. His face lay in the dirt. "No," he groaned. "No."

"It's my Mam come back, but it's all right. She won't hurt the bairn."

His face was wet with sweat. His shoulders trembled and his feet jerked like a man gripped by fever, kicking feebly at the earth.

"Malcolm, get up," she said, starting to shake herself. "Get up and come inside. This is nae enow to kill a man."

"Isn't it?" he gasped, and beat the dirt with his fist. "Isn't it?"

When Malcolm finally sat up, Ellen knelt on the ground and hugged him hard. "She's not come for the bairn."

"She's one of Them," Malcolm said, into her neck.

"She's not," Ellen said, though she knew her mother had told the truth: she was more than half Faer now.

"They'll come for her."

"They'll not," she said sharply. Letting him go, she searched his face, assessing his fear, which was powerful; looking for his strength. "If They do, we'll ward Them off."

"Send her back, Ellen," he begged. "Make her go."

"You'd turn my Mam out of our house?"

He met her gaze. He did not say: *my* house, it is *my* house. He said, "I'm afraid."

Gripping his hands, Ellen stood, drawing him up with her. "Will you come inside with me now, my heart?"

"Aye," he said, after a moment. "But I canna promise you to stay."

"Stay or go, I canna keep you against your will," she replied.

Giorsal had shifted the baby to her other dug. "Breast against breast, a piece of human flesh in a toothless mouth," she said, beaming.

Malcolm stopped, staring. Taking his arm, Ellen pulled him away. She sat him at the table, filled a bowl from the pot of porridge, and put it before him, along with a dish of butter and a half-round of brown bread. Malcolm didn't look at her, or seem to notice the food in front of him. He kept his eyes on the young woman in rags nursing his son at her pale, almost translucent breast.

"How can you let her?" he burst out.

"My milk is good, man," Giorsal said, quietly. "It's what They took me for, after all."

"My wife's milk is good enough for my child!" he shouted.

"Don't fash yourself so," she replied, eyes twinkling. "It might make him a fine piper, or give him a bit of the Sight."

Laying a hand on his back, Ellen said, "Malcolm, eat. Aren't you hungry?"

"No," he said, but picked up a spoon and dipped it blindly into the bowl.

"I think he's finished now, Mam," Ellen said, going to the bed. Giorsal gave her the baby with a smile, and rearranged her rags with a flick of her hand. Tormaid blinked at Ellen sleepily. She peered into her face anxiously for a moment, then hoisted him on her shoulder to pat his back. "See, Malcolm, he's taken no hurt. He's fine."

Malcolm stood up, leaving the spoon stuck in the porridge like a bare flagpole. He strode to the bed past Ellen, who looked at him in alarm. Squatting, Malcolm thrust his arm under the bed and drew out the old iron plough blade. Holding it in both hands, he thrust it toward Giorsal. "Touch it," he demanded.

Ellen opened her mouth, then made herself shut it.

Obediently, like a child complying with a command, Giorsal laid her palm on the plough blade. A small wrinkle formed between her eyebrows. "It's cold," she said.

Malcolm put the blade on the floor, then took Giorsal's wrist and turned her hand over. Giorsal allowed him to touch her without comment. The pale skin on her palm was slightly rosy where it had come in contact with the iron, but that was all.

Malcolm let out a little sigh.

"Are you done?" Ellen asked.

His shoulders stiffening, he shook his head. To Giorsal he said, "Are you a mortal woman? Do you have red blood in you, or white froth?"

"I don't know," she answered evenly. "It's been so long since I bled."

Malcolm reached into his pocket and pulled out a penknife.

"You'll not!" Ellen cried.

"I don't mind," said Giorsal, with a smile. "In fact, I'd like to find out myself." With a movement so swift it made Malcolm flinch, she reached out and stabbed the pad of her forefinger on the tip of the open penknife. After a moment, a drop of pale reddish blood welled from the little wound.

"One more!" Giorsal sang. "There must be three!" She beamed at Malcolm and Ellen. Still grinning, her eyes filled with tears. Swiftly, the tears spilled out over her cheeks and ran down her face, two torrents of water. She soaked her rags, and she soaked the bedclothes where she sat. Slowly, her smile faded. She cried for a long time.

Malcolm gripped his knees and stared.

"It's nae so uncanny," Ellen said, after a while. "It's twenty-one years' worth she has in her, after all."

"Aye," he said slowly. Rising, he went back to the table, and tore the bread in half.

When Giorsal was done, Ellen asked, "Will you eat with us, Mam?"

Her eyes sparkling, Giorsal said, "Aye, daughter, and gladly."

That night, after all the work was done and the last meal eaten, with

Tormaid asleep and peaceful in his cradle, and the pallet made up for Giorsal on the floor near the hearth, Malcolm shuttered the window and barred it with iron. Ellen took two of the good candles, the white wax ones, from their box, lit them and set them on the table.

Tightly, Malcolm said, "Tis May Eve."

"I know it."

Giorsal sat at the small table, smiling, but saying nothing.

"If They come," said Ellen, "I want to see Them."

"Is it May Eve?" Giorsal murmured.

"Aye, Mam."

"If I don't go now, I won't be able to until All Hallow's Eve."

Ellen was silent. Biting her lip, she glanced at Malcolm.

"I know one," he said, suddenly. "Two small fair girls — they caught fever and died."

Giorsal glanced at him. She pointed at the candles, and burst into laughter. "Your man's got a wit," she said to Ellen.

"Aye, he's got a bit."

Giorsal said, "We dinna need these lights, love. 'Tis time to go to bed."

Malcolm sighed with relief, but Ellen hesitated.

Giorsal rose and fetched down a wooden bowl from the shelf. Ellen went cold. "Mam?"

"'Tis May Eve," she said. "It does no harm."

"No! I won't have it, Mam! I hate Them."

"Do you?" she asked, quietly. "I don't." She filled the bowl with the last of the milk in the pitcher. "They are sad Folk, at the bottom of it, despite their music."

"I hate Them, Mam," Ellen repeated. "They're evil."

"They're not," Giorsal said. "They're just Sidhe." She carried the bowl to the door. Malcolm, avoiding Ellen's eyes, opened it for her.

She set the bowl down outside the door, and came back in. "Do you hate me?"

"No," Ellen whispered.

Malcolm shut the door and dropped the heavy iron bar into its brackets. "I'm going to bed," he announced.

Giorsal crossed the room and sat on the pallet made up for her, a pair of blankets spread over a thin straw tick. She kept her back to Malcolm as he undressed.

Ellen blew out one of the candles.

"I can still go," Giorsal said. "There's sometime yet when the way is still visible."

"No. Mam, I don't want you to go."

"I'm glad."

Ellen bent toward the second candle. Giorsal said, "Wait."

Ellen waited.

"I'm sorry," Giorsal said. "I've been trying all day to remember. I — 'tis a terrible thing to have to ask. My love, I canna recollect your name."

Ellen had been holding her breath. She let it out loudly. "Ah, is that all? It's Ellen."

"Ellen," Giorsal repeated softly. "Ah, that's it. Your da had a notion to call you Mairghread, but I would have no name but Ellen. Well, then. Good night, Ellen."

"Good night, Mam," Ellen said, and blew out the candle.

❄

Patricia Russo writes: "I live in New Jersey, much against my will; I've been published in the top anthology **WOMEN OF DARKNESS**, as well as the small press zines *Space and Time*, *Tales of the Unanticipated*, *White Knuckles*, and several others."

Allison Hershey's published work has graced computer software covers and science fiction and fantasy publications. In addition to her freelance career she is art director for The Dreamers Guild, a computer software design company.

Artwork by Allison Hershey

Fairy Fruit

by Patricia Russo

The fairy fruit sat perfectly in Fychan's palm, as if it had been grown to fit his hand. For all Gwenfrewi knew, it had. As pale a pink as the inside of a sea shell and unnaturally round, the thing soaked the air with the scent of honey. The next minute it gave forth the smoky aroma of roasted nuts, the next the odor of rich yellow cream, the next the mingled smells of a hundred meadow flowers. Gwenfrewi's head spun, and she thought she was going to be sick.

Fychan bit into the fruit, eyes closing as his lips touched the blush-pink skin. His long lashes were stark black against his pale cheeks. Gwenfrewi's heart swelled with pain. He chewed slowly, a dreamy expression on his face. The fruit's flesh was a horrible grass-green, poisonous-looking, soft but unjuicy. The scent of primroses swirled around her.

Licking his lips, Fychan sighed with pleasure. He took another bite.

"I hate you," Gwenfrewi said. "I could kill you."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "Truly, Gwen." He licked his lips again, and lowered the fruit. It was whole, as entire as if he'd never torn two hearty bites of it. So it had been ever since he had accepted it ten days ago, and so it would remain, however much Fychan ate of it, until the woman of the Tylwyth Teg returned to carry him away.

"How could you do this?" She had been hurling the same words at him for ten days. In those ten days Fychan's responses had grown shorter and shorter, until now all she could get out of him was a faint sigh and a mumbled sorry. She wondered if he would fall completely mute by the time it came for him to go.

He ate nothing but the fairy fruit, and drank nothing at all. Already flesh was falling away from his bones. His skin was becoming translucent; at the same time his eyes, once an ordinary, warm brown, were darkening to a deep, light-trapping, soulless black. His sight was sharpening; once times she found him staring raptly at what she took to be nothing, until he murmured he was watching ants crawling over a cracked egg in a wren's nest a hundred yards away. Gwenfrewi feared that as Fychan's sight grew keener, it became harder for him to see the ordinary things of this world. It was as if his eyes were turning fey before the rest of him.

"Don't do this," she pleaded. The first day, she had cried that she loved him, and screamed that he had sworn he loved her. Now it hurt too much to say those words yet again. "We were to be married," she said, and could not keep the bitterness out of her voice.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. Languidly, he raised the perfect, undiminishing fruit to his lips and took a big bite.

She left him, because she could not bear to sit and watch him eat of that unearthly fruit, and eat of it with so much enjoyment; but only a little later she sought him out again, because she could not bear to be apart from him.

Gwenfrewi found Fychan where she had left him, sitting on the bank of the

Artwork by Margaret Davis

stream that ran through the sheep pasture their families shared. He hadn't moved since morning, not even to seek shade; the noon sun shone down full on his head, but he didn't seem to mind it, or in truth even notice it. As for watching the sheep, a dozen ravening wolves might have loped into the meadow and had their choice of bellies to rip and throats to tear for all the heed Fychan paid.

Gwenfrewi picked her way down to the stream slowly, so as not to startle him; in a way she thought of Fychan as a man moving through his days in a sort of twilit sleep, from which it might be dangerous to abruptly rouse him. Though she knew this wasn't true — a boulder could crash down from the mountaintop directly beside him and Fychan wouldn't so much as flinch — she still approached him with care.

Suddenly Gwenfrewi stopped short. An invisible iron band tightened around her chest, squeezing the breath from her.

Fychan was talking.

"Mam weeps without ceasing," he said, languidly. "Da curses and threatens to beat me from Dyfed to Gwynedd and from Gwynedd to Gwent." Pausing, he tilted his head, as if listening to someone, though Gwenfrewi could plainly see he was alone on the bank.

The thought came to her with the shock of a lightening stroke: he was talking to *her*.

Fychan nodded, lazily. "Yes, my love. Oh yes, I am very happy to go." He paused again, then murmured, "No, I swear to you, I feel no regret." Abruptly, his voice sharpened, and he sat up a little. "Why? Do you regret this gift, my love? Do you rue your promise to me?"

Yes, Gwenfrewi thought fiercely, *yes, please heaven, let it be so!*

But Fychan relaxed, sinking down against the soft shoulder of the grassy bank. He smiled. "Tell me again, my love. I will live with you forever and ever, and never grow old?"

A faint rustling tickled Gwenfrewi's ear, like the shush-shushing of a light wind through dry leaves. *Never grow old,* she heard the small, whispery voice repeat.

"And never die?" Fychan murmured.

Never die.

"I'll love you forever."

Love me forever.

Gwenfrewi shivered violently.

Fychan didn't sleep much any more; while the sun shone, he napped like a cat, dozing for no longer than it took to milk a ewe, then waking to bite into his fairy fruit again. Nights, he wandered the hillsides, a silent spectre haunting the pasturelands. Gwenfrewi thought he was learning the fairy roads, those ways and paths that sometimes ran along the tracks made by human folk and could be glimpsed by men and women with an eye to see them. Every now and then he would vanish from her sight, and she would know he was walking one of the ways whose course lay within the other world. Fychan trod those paths only a short distance, for now; but each night he traveled them longer.

Before dawn each day, Fychan laid himself down behind a hedge or hayrick or mossy stone wall and slept his only true sleep from sunup to sunup, a deep still cold sleep that nothing could break until the sun's bottom edge cleared the top of the eastern hills.

Gwenfrewi knew, because she followed him.

She followed him night after night for seven nights. Sometimes when he strolled the human paths of the hillsides, Fychan spoke to the air, and the air replied faintly, a sound like a thin wind shivering dry leaves, or a trickle of water leisurely polishing rough pebbles smooth. He nibbled his fruit, and lost weight, and the fruit remained ever whole.

From the day Fychan had accepted the fruit from the hand of the woman of the Tylwyth Teg, half a month and more had slipped away. The moon had been new then; when it was new again, and the night as dark as the inside of a barrel, she would take him away for ever.

On the seventh night, weary, eyes gritty from lack of sleep, a big tear in the sleeve of her sweater where she'd caught it in a hedge, a throbbing bruise on her arm where her mother had pinched her for falling asleep over the butter churn, Gwenfrewi shored her courage up on one side with hatred and on the other with love, crept to the hollow on the hillside where Fychan had fallen asleep, and stole the fruit from him.

She almost cried out when she touched it; it was as cold and slick as a hailstone, and bigger than it had appeared in Fychan's hand, as large and round as a newborn baby's head. Though it sucked the warmth from her flesh, she closed her fingers around it and lifted it out from his loose, sleep-slackened grip.

Then she ran as fast as she could in the greyness of the cool false dawn to the stream in the sheep pasture and threw it in.

Her hand stung, as if she'd been clutching an icicle. The fruit made no sound as it entered the shallow, slow-running water. "You won't take him from me," she said, viciously. "He's mine. We're supposed to call you the good folk, but you're not. You're evil, to lure him with lies and dreams and poisoned fruit. I won't let you have him."

Drawing a deep breath to calm her pounding heart, she turned away. A movement in the water caught her eye. She stopped, staring, and her heart began to race faster and faster, until she thought it must burst.

The fruit rose out of the leaden water of the stream as if lifted up on an invisible palm. A mist, grey and damp, swirled out of the water and coalesced into a slim, smoke-colored arm. Slowly a body grew, its lower part rooted in

Artwork by Margaret Davis

the stream, the upper a slim, translucent female form. Her hair cascaded down her back like the unkempt mane of an old mad hag, but her face was so lovely it stole Gwenfrewi's breath.

The fairy woman gazed at her with an expression of deep puzzlement, then looked at the fruit. Her face darkened.

Her offense was so grave Gwenfrewi expected the woman of the Tylwyth Teg to blast her where she stood. She had, therefore, nothing to lose. Trembling, her legs shaking so badly she could barely stand, Gwenfrewi said, "You can't have him. I won't let you take him. He's mine."

The woman of the Tylwyth Teg said, "I didn't know." Her voice was neither like a whispering wind, nor a trickle of water over smooth stones, but thin and crackling, the dry sound of a flame chewing through sawdust.

"We pledged ourselves to each other half a year past."

"I didn't know."

Gwenfrewi shivered; she clutched her elbows to hold herself still. "Thief," she said. "Seducer. Have you no men of your own? Why do you want him?"

"I want him because he is beautiful," she said. "But I did not know he was yours." She weighed the fruit in her hand. "He told me he was free."

"Liar," Gwenfrewi spat. "Every word from your mouth is a lie. You are the same as all your people, all liars and tricksters and thieves."

She shut her mouth with a snap, and waited to die.

"He said he was free," murmured the woman of the Tylwyth Teg. "If anyone has lied, it is he. I have spoken only the truth."

"Liar," Gwenfrewi said again. "No one can live forever. No one can never die."

"In your lands, that is so. In mine it is not." She regarded the unearthly fruit with a sad expression. Setting her jaw, Gwenfrewi looked away, refusing to be gulled by a fairy's pretended emotion.

Artwork by Margaret Davis

Everybody knew they didn't have *real* emotions.

"Tell me, child," the woman said. "Do you want him still, now that you know he is untrue?"

"He isn't!" she cried. "If he is, it's because you tricked him, lured him, *made* so. It's not his fault. You're *changing* him."

"He asked for this gift, and accepted it most gladly," the woman said, her voice cracking now like the snapping of dry twigs. She lowered her hand, letting the fruit dip into the water. "I thought him brave as well as beautiful."

"He is," Gwenfrewi said.

"I think perhaps he is something else," the woman said, "and yet I, too, want him still."

"No!"

"Wait," she said, "wait. I believe you, you see." She opened her hand, and let the fruit drop; it vanished beneath the grey water without a sound.

Gwenfrewi felt giddy; the ground seemed to dissolve under her feet, leaving her suspended in a tilting, wobbly, joyful bubble of air. Then she took a good look at the face of the woman of the Tylwyth Teg.

"Find me a fruit of your world," the woman commanded. "Any will do. Go, quickly, and bring one to me."

Fearing the woman of the Tylwyth Teg to the core of her marrow, Gwenfrewi obeyed. The sky was brightening and the sun almost completely risen when she returned to the stream, clutching a hard green crab-apple. She began to gasp out an apology, to explain that it was the best she could find so early in the year, but the woman simply held out her hand.

"Give it to me."

Trembling, Gwenfrewi tried to

toss it; the crab-apple slipped out of her fingers and rolled down the bank. The woman of the Tylwyth Teg moved through the water without ripple or splash, and scooped up the hard round fruit.

"I shall cast a glamour on it," she said. "Then you yourself will place it in Fychan's hand. When the term of days is completed, he will decide for himself. Do you understand?"

"No," said Gwenfrewi.

"I want him still, but I will not force him — nor have you believe that I enticed him to betray you by any cantrip or working of power." She cast the apple up on the bank, and it bumped to a stop at Gwenfrewi's feet. In form and color, it seemed a twin to the fruit she had stolen from Fychan as he lay sleeping, but when she picked it up she knew at once it was the humble green crab-apple she had picked from the tree behind Hywel's barn.

"If he chooses me now, you can have no complaint," the woman said. "If he chooses you ..." She turned her head, and gazed down at the grey, leaden-colored water for a moment. She looked like a grey-haired angel who by some odd misadventure found herself standing in a chilly stream: bewildered, lost, but unutterably beautiful. Gwenfrewi hated her deeply. "Likewise I shall have no complaint," she said at last.

"I hate you," Gwenfrewi said.

"You don't even know what hate is," said the woman of the Tylwyth Teg.

In the instant of waking, in the same moment he opened his eyes, Fychan raised the fruit to his mouth and bit into it. Gwenfrewi, her heart pounding and her breath ragged from running all the way from the stream to beat the rising sun, saw him chew and swallow, chew and swallow, and notice nothing.

Gwenfrewi was afraid the change in fruits was merely a malicious trick, a ploy to keep her hopeful and quiet until the moon turned new. That afternoon, she slipped out to the sheep pasture with a loaf of new bread and fresh butter. Fychan pretended to scorn the offering, but when she began to eat of it herself she felt his eyes on her. Breaking off a small piece of buttered bread, she held it out to him.

Frowning, Fychan bit into his fruit. He chewed furiously.

No human food passed Fychan's lips that day or the next. On the day following, Gwenfrewi stole a white roll and a bit of boiled mutton from her mother's larder; when she offered them to Fychan he snatched the bread and meat from her hands and crammed it into his mouth.

I've won, Gwenfrewi thought, joy swelling in her heart. She grinned triumphantly.

Fychan scowled at her blackly.

She fed him bacon and potcheese, porridge and eggs, cabbage and cream, boiled chicken and turnips, and lashings of brown bread and white. She fed him on new milk and curds and whey, toasted cheese and biscuits and jam. Fychan ate like a starveling, putting on all the flesh he had lost and more; but still he carried the green crab-apple he thought was the fairy fruit, eating of it every day.

He still spent his days napping and his nights wandering over the hillside, sometimes walking the paths made by men and women, but sometimes, too, traveling the ways of the other side.

It's all right, Gwenfrewi thought. The power of the fairy fruit is yet on him, but it will fade in time.

Sometimes Fychan spoke to the air, and the air replied; but that was all right too, because Gwenfrewi spoke to Fychan as well, for hours at a time, and it seemed that as the moon waned Fychan's replies to her waxed. They talked about the weather and the sheep, and Gwenfrewi was happy. She never brought up the subject of the woman of the Tylwyth Teg, and neither did he.

As the moon shrank, Fychan grew agitated. He paced up and down the bank of the stream, shifting the fruit from left hand to right, then biting it savagely. But he bit the loaves and white sausages Gwenfrewi gave him just as savagely, and with a deal more pleasure.

We'll be married in the summer, she thought. Time'll pass, and he'll forget. All will be well.

The day before the night of the new moon, Gwenfrewi stuck to Fychan's side like a leashed hound. From daybreak to nightfall she was with him, and a good thing too, she thought, as the sun began to set and the woman of the Tylwyth Teg rose greyly out of the water of the broad, shallow stream, a good thing I didn't wait until the dark of the moon to come to him, because she didn't, did she, the lying, unchancy creature.

Fychan let out a sigh like a dying man's last breath.

"You came."

"Of course I came," she said, and her voice was like the rippling of a faster, colder stream than the one she stood in. "I promised."

"I'm ready," said Fychan.

"No!" Gwenfrewi cried, from high on the bank.

"Your mother, your father?" asked the woman of the Tylwyth Teg.

He shook his head, shrugging, and spread his hands wide. "I love you more than I love my Da or my Mam."

"And her?" asked the woman of the Tylwyth Teg.

"I never promised her," Fychan said. "I swear I never did."

"Liar!" Gwenfrewi shrieked.

"Yes, you are a liar," said the woman of the Tylwyth Teg. "But you are beautiful and amusing and young, and I have been alone and sad and bored for a very long time." She held out her hand to him.

"Will you come?"

"Yes," he said instantly.

"You can't!" Gwenfrewi screamed. "He can't!" she shouted at the woman of the Tylwyth Teg.

"He can," she replied. "The journey

Artwork by Margaret Davis

will be harder than it might have been, but I can take him across the border. If he wills it."

"I do."

"Throw your apple away, my heart."

Fychan, confused, looked around, then at the fruit in his hand. He dropped on the ground, and it became a green crab-apple. "I don't understand," he said.

"I have not tricked him or beguiled him, nor cast any spell on him," said the woman of the Tylwyth Teg. "I am not a thief and I am not a liar. Come," she said, and Fychan stepped off the bank and into the stream, splashing loudly as he waded toward her. He took her hand, and the roiled water slowly stilled.

On the bank, Gwenfrewi wept. "I'm sorry," said the woman. "I know your people believe that mine are a cruel kind, but we are not. I offer you a gift, if you will accept it."

She threw something up on the bank, then turned to Fychan and smiled. "Come then, if you're coming."

"With all my heart," Fychan said.

They moved off together toward the opposite bank; long before they reached the midpoint of the stream both Fychan and the woman of the Tylwyth Teg greyed; the outline of their figures swirled like mist, and they faded from Gwenfrewi's view.

On the grass below her lay a round fruit with a pale pink skin that she knew would fit perfectly into the hollow of her palm, as if it had been grown to match her hand. A scent of baking bread rose, was wafted away by a breeze, and was replaced by the smell of strawberries.

Gwenfrewi wiped her eyes and cursed. She felt a great urge to stomp her heel down on the fairy fruit, but she mastered herself and simply walked away from it.

She'd almost reached the end of the pasture when she turned around, came back, and picked it up. "I don't want this gift," she said aloud, and made to throw it into the stream.

She thought she heard two voices murmuring to each other within the light breeze that blew across the stream: *forever*, one said, and *forever* repeated the other; *young*, said the first, and *forever* said the other again. But it was probably her imagination.

She carried the fruit home, not looking it at, but she could not help smelling it, nor feeling how it nestled, warm and slightly fuzzy (not cold, not slick like Fychan's) so perfectly in the palm of her hand.

She left it on a fence post, and went inside the house. Then she came out again.

Forever, she thought. Forever and ever. To see Fychan with *her* forever. To be alone there forever, as she was now alone here.

Fychan was not worth grieving over, she thought. In truth she was well shut of him, the false, lying man. But sorrow sat on her like a lead weight.

"Is that you, Gwenfrewi?" her mother called, angrily. "Have you come home at last, then?"

Yes, she thought. No.

"Gwen?" Sharper now, a bit worried. "Is it you?"

"Yes, Mam," she called. She had screamed and cried on the bank; now her grief only made her feel weary, nearly sleepy. She looked at the fairy fruit, hating it, abhoring this false gift from the woman who had taken from her the only thing she had ever truly wanted.

They must think a lot of themselves, the Tylwyth Teg, to imagine that such a gift would be welcome.

Young. Forever.

Forever.

I hate them, she thought. I hate them.

"I'm coming, Mam," she said.

"About time, too," her mother called back, in her old scolding tone.

Gwenfrewi went inside, the fairy fruit a warm and pleasant weight in the cup of her hand. ❄

Patricia Russo has been published in the anthology **WOMEN OF DARKNESS**, as well as the small press zines *Space and Time, Tales of the Unanticipated, White Knuckles, Symphonie's Gift, Dark Muse, Nyx Obscura,* and others. She lives in New Jersey with her dog, cat , and mother who mutters, "Get a job," with depressing regularity.

Margaret Davis has sold illustrations and calligraphy to *FANTASY Magazine* on numerous occasions; she also created the cover for issue #38. She lives in Oakland, CA with 2 cats, 3 harps, and a musical husband.

Artwork by Margaret Davis

THE LAST WORD

As soon as I drop this issue at the printer's, I am off to Westercon; barely a month later, I'll be leaving for WorldCon; on Thursday I will present one of the Chesleys. The Chesley Awards, chosen by members of ASFA, the artists' association, are named for Chesley Bonestell, an old-time sf cover artist known for beautiful renditions of the planets. This year, ASFA has produced a four-page flyer with reproductions of all the nominated art. I'm honored to have been selected as an award presenter — look for me in sequins!

This has been a month with a double deadline: issue 40, and a hardcover anthology called **MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY'S FANTASY WORLDS**, a limited-edition book (300 copies) to commemorate this year's Fantasy Worlds Festival. Margaret Davis has come up with a beautiful design for the book, which features an embossed Alicia Austin dragon on the cover. The stories in the hardcover are topnotch.

Last week, Jack Rems at Dark Carnival showed me an "instant book" — after my work on our anthology, I wasn't real impressed with its cover, but the text pages seemed okay. But Jack and I worry that this will let publishers control an author's books forever without actually keeping them in print or doing any promotion to encourage sales. (Current book contracts allow ownership to revert to its author when the book is no longer in print. But the definition of "in print" appears to be changing.) Perhaps in the future, authors will license their books to publishers for a finite time. This is what Alexandria Digital Literature does — stories are licensed for three years, and after that time the author and the publisher must renegotiate their agreement.

— Rachel E. Holmen

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THE CAULDRON — ISSUE #40

STORY	ARTIST
❑ **Ivy** by Esther M. Friesner	❑ Mark Harrison (cover) ❑ Vincent Di Fate (interior)
❑ **Screaming Bloody Murder** by Dorothy Heydt	❑ Gail Butler
❑ **Neighborhood Watch** by Lee Martindale	❑ Vincent Di Fate
❑ **Fairy Tale** by Julia Watts	❑ Margaret Organ-Kean
❑ **The Beast Revealed!** by Peggy Ramsey	❑ Julia Lacquement
❑ **The Piper's Tale** by Laura J. Underwood	❑ Michael Kucharski
❑ **Running to Camelot** by Darrell Schweitzer	❑ George Barr
❑ **Giorsal** by Patricia Russo	❑ Allison Hershey
❑ **Fairy Fruit** by Patricia Russo	❑ Margaret Davis

Only one ballot per reader, please!!!

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Want a subscription? An order blank is on page 63. A back issue order form is on page 23. T-shirt information is also on page 23 — we have just a few left!

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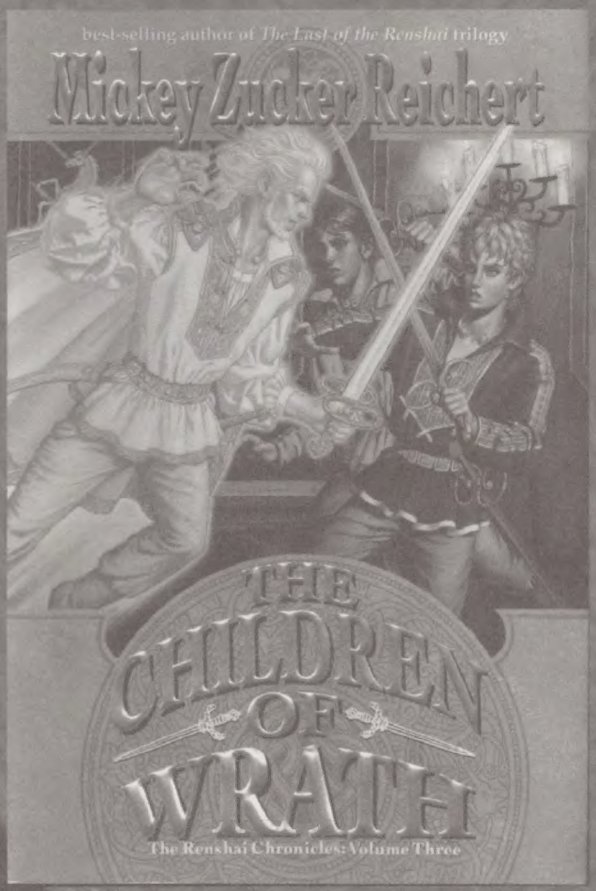
MICKEY ZUCKER REICHERT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FANTASY DAW

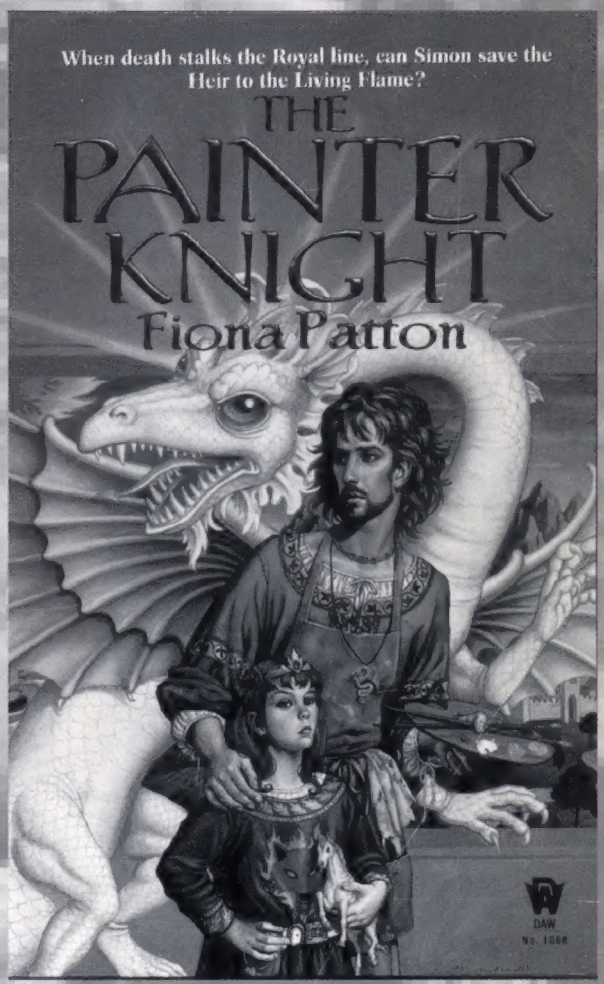
THE PAINTER KNIGHT
FIONA PATTON

THE PASSING OF THE FLAME—

Simon, the Court Painter of Branion, was the closest friend of the kingdom's ruler, Aristok Marsellus the Third. And though Marsellus was the vessel of the Living Flame, able to call upon the power of his god at need, while Simon was a follower of the opposing Essusiate religion, still it was the painter, not Marsellus' own priests and guards, who was the Aristok's staunchest ally and defender.

Yet not even Simon could protect Marsellus from unexpected treachery within the Branion court. But when an assassin's blade put a sudden end to Marsellus' reign, it was Simon who—at the dictate of both his own god and his friend's specter—became the champion and rescuer of the new Aristok, Marsellus' five-year-old daughter Kassandra.

With civil and religious war threatening the suddenly leaderless realm, and Kassandra herself fighting to survive the trial of becoming the new vessel of the Living Flame, Simon had no choice but to flee Branion with the child. Pursued by the very forces which should have been the new ruler's protectors, Simon and a most unlikely band of companions have to keep both the child and her powers hidden while they make a desperate bid to reach the one person who could offer the uncrowned Aristok both sanctuary and a chance, however desperate, of regaining her kingdom and bringing her father's slayers to justice.



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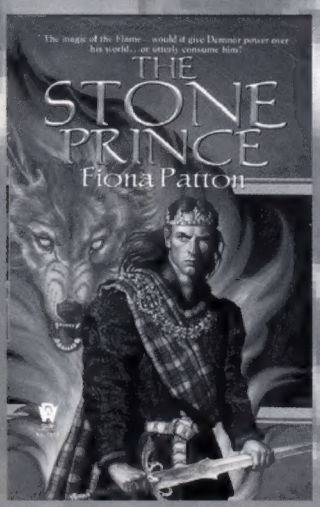

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